THE AMAZING GUEST

By

GILBERT WATSON

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GILBERT WATSON

Author of "Three Rolling Stones in Japan," "Forbidden Ground" "Toddie," etc., etc.

BOSTON AND NEW YORK
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
The Riverside Press Cambridge
1924

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The Riverside Press
CAMBRIDGE · MASSACHUSETTS
PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

This "is a doubtful tale from faëry land,
Hard for the non-elect to understand."

KEATS: "Lamia"

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CHAPTER I

"THERE's a man a woman might fall in love with — desperately, — and repent it afterwards," murmured Gamine, more to herself than to me. Following the direction of her eyes, I saw that she was gazing intently at a solitary diner.

In view of the smartness of the restaurant, the fact that he was not attired in orthodox evening-dress was sufficiently remarkable. And yet it struck me that, among the many magpie garbs, his free-and-easy costume provided a contrast as refreshing as it was unexpected.

Nor was it only the unconventionality of his dress that arrested attention. Not by any means.

"Odd!" I commented aloud. "That old, worn velveteen jacket — he might have slept in it! The wonder is that they let him in. Looks too healthy to be an artist. Might be an eccentric millionaire, or a strayed reveller, or a messenger from Mars, or —"

But here I turned to the fair lady I was privileged to entertain, and treated her to a reproachful glance, for it was obvious that she had not heard one word I had said. My glance was likewise wasted, for it encountered only a pretty profile, a mass of wavy brown hair, and a little shell-like ear.

"Gamine," I remonstrated mildly, "keep off the personal. Please remember this is only a 'case.' Don't

forget that you and I are specialists in affairs of the heart, and that we meet occasionally to discover these affairs — which are really no affairs of ours — in other people. If you see symptoms of love in anyone present, diagnose them dispassionately, but for Heaven's sake don't go and imagine that you are catching the complaint yourself."

She laughed merrily — as she always does at any nonsense of mine — and I, listening, became conscious of a very real pleasure. When I am in Gamine's society I am as stimulated by the blessed fact of her existence as I am by sunshine, or chutney, or flowers, or the sound of the French language.

"That's better," I approved, smiling at her. "Now, what I wanted to impress upon you is that 'the proper study of mankind is man,' and the most dangerous is woman. I suppose Pope had women in his eye, too, when he wrote that. Was there a Mrs. Pope? There must have been. A philosopher has nothing to be philosophic about unless he's married."

"Don't be cynical, Jack."

"I've no cause to be, my dear — only philosophical. Life has dealt too kindly with me for that — spoilt me, I sometimes think."

Gamine murmured something pleasantly untruthful; she is an adept at little complimentary speeches that mean nothing by saying everything. Motioning to the waiter to replenish our empty glasses, I endeavoured to find out why he of the velveteen coat interested her.

She moved her gleaming shoulders uneasily.

"I don't know. He makes me feel restless — dissatisfied with all this — the garishness, the artificiality. Somehow, he makes me long for the country, as it must be on a night like this, under the full moon." She paused; then, giving a little shiver, added: "I don't think I like it; it's uncanny."

"I know — the 'call of the wild.' I feel it myself."

But to this she paid not the slightest attention.

"Jack!" she cried suddenly, "aren't his eyes wonderful?"

The solitary diner had at that moment looked up, and allowed the eyes in question to travel slowly round the restaurant.

"Not more than his appetite," I remarked cheerfully. "Look! Second helping! Not more than his extraordinary open-air effect. And yet, as you say, they are odd."

"I didn't. I said 'wonderful.' They're as green as my emerald. See?" — and she extended an exquisitely manicured hand, and showed me a jewel with a light in it wicked as *crème de menthe.*

I acquiesced merely to pacify her. Now, although I knew her to be nothing if not enthusiastic where human beings — and more especially male human beings — are concerned, yet this feverish feminine interest in a total stranger aroused my astonishment.

It was with the hope of steering the conversation into the placid waters of philosophical discussion that I enquired lightly why a woman would find it necessary to fall in love with this mysterious stranger, and why, if she succeeded in so doing, she would necessarily repent it.

Gamine sipped her champagne daintily, stole another long look at the subject of our discussion from between semi-closed eyelids, then volunteered the following remarkable information:

"She'd fall in love with him because she couldn't help it."

I suppressed a smile.

"And she'd repent it because he couldn't help it," she concluded — after which cryptic utterance she sighed, presumably from sheer absence of sorrow.

"Do we agree that he's a bachelor?" I asked in my best professional manner. The amount of indignation Gamine put into her affirmative took me aback.

"If he weren't, it would be almost a crime. There ought to be a commandment — 'Thou shalt not marry an artistic temperament.' How much more useful than informing a man that he mustn't marry his grandmother. Marriage is sometimes more than a crime — it's a stupidity. I know."

I was too wise to say what I thought, and too honest to say what I didn't.

"Yes," she continued with characteristic irrelevance, "I like his absence of dress. I rather envy him there. Not that I've much of the bohemian about me, but one must feel so free, and it is always interesting to be unlike other people. No, Jack, you could no more tie that man down by conventions than you could a — well, a lone wolf."

I laughed, and was informed, not without reproach, that I did not know how to take her. Ye gods! What an unmerited accusation! Am I not a past-master in the art of "taking" Gamine? Do I not take her wisely, joyously, gratefully — but not too well?

"Laugh away" — she gave the prettiest little toss to her head — "I know because I know."

We were interrupted by coffee and liqueurs, after which, while lighting her cigarette, I remarked:

"To you, that man over there is apparently something elemental."

Delighted recognition and smoke issued simultaneously from her lips. "Elemental! How clever of you, Jack! That's exactly how I feel."

"M—m, sounds as if it might be dangerous."

Her eyes sparkled. "That depends."

"And if a woman were attracted by this — this irresponsible force, when would the repentance begin?"

"When he flew away. You see, he would take away so much with him — all that one couldn't find in anyone else. Look, he's smiling. *Now* d'you see what I mean?"

There certainly was something strange in that smile, and I conceded the point, but added that it was surely a purely theoretical conclusion that he would of necessity want to leave her.

"No," said Gamine earnestly. "He would tire of her very quickly."

"Depends on the woman."

"No; any woman. I'm not sure that I don't sympathise with him there. I'd tire of most women in a week. Wouldn't you?"

"Horrible idea. Doesn't make for domestic happiness."

She treated me to a gesture of impatience.

"You don't catch my meaning at all. There can be no such thing as domestic happiness for that man. Domestic happiness is possible for some — improbable for others. He'd always expect impossibilities."

I was trying to translate this into English as I knew it, when she continued: "Women have their valleys as well as their mountain-tops, and that man would always be skipping on mountain-tops. As a husband, he'd be an appalling failure. He'd make neither settlements nor allowances. He'd never sympathise properly with her hats. And, if he found her crying, he'd laugh."

"Great Cæsar! you're describing a monster!"

"It wouldn't be his fault. A man who could wear a coat like that in a place like this — a man with those eyes and that smile — is just a bit of wild nature. He'd prefer hair to hats any day — lots of it, you know, and down. And when he left her (he's bound to) and laughed himself away, she'd feel as poor little Psyche did when that wicked Cupid flew out of her window."

"Psyche met him again all right."

"Yes, on Olympus. Women are not made goddesses nowadays — not in England — especially married women. We have either to pine in widowed loneliness, or — "

"Or dine out with another specialist on the affairs of the heart?"

We shared a happy laugh. After which Gamine took a dainty puff at her cigarette, shrugged to keep a rebellious shoulder-strap up to the mark, and asked me how I liked her dress.

We were silent for a while listening to the music. The restaurant had engaged a celebrated Russian violinist. There was a pianist, too, but he merely accompanied. The Russian was a roving spirit, and strayed here and there among the many little tables, scattering melodies. Though hailing from the North, he appeared to possess a temperament purely of the South. He flamed in his music — it shook him — it tore its way out. He was obviously a mass of nerves, strung up to concert-pitch like the quivering strings of his violin. I could well imagine how a man like that would feel intensely, would resent inattention, would respond to appreciation.

"Jack!" cried my companion suddenly. "Look! He's playing to our client."

It was a gross breach of professional etiquette. The "case" was indubitably ours. And now here was this foreign fellow, this fiddler, bowing to him, smiling at him, settling to his nefarious task in a horrible and business-like manner, probing for a heart with his pitiful stock-in-trade — an empty box, a little stick, and a host of wizard sounds. It was simply piratical. Yet, what could we do? Nothing.

I have often wondered if intuition alone were responsible for the selection of the piece. To me, later,

the dance-music — assuredly no measure ever trod by mortal feet — came fantastically to recollection, endowed with a significance so appropriate as to seem almost miraculous. It recalled Gamine's longing for the country — for moonlight. It whispered of dewy glades. It breathed of wind-blown heights. It rippled of running joy. And always — always it suggested lands of faëry.

Its effect upon the solitary diner was remarkable. He forgot his surroundings. He leaned forward, his elbows among the dessert dishes. He drank in the haunting sounds with eagerness, with rapture, with intoxication. Then, as the last mad notes danced from the leaping bow, he sprang to his feet.

The Russian stared at the proffered hand with amazement bordering upon incredulity. Then, as the genuineness of the compliment struck home, he exhibited a boyish delight that must, I feel sure, have charmed many present.

One moment they stood thus, hand grasping hand, then the world reclaimed them — the world represented by the heated, crowded room — by the many pale faces watching them with astonishment, with amusement, with coldness, with sympathy.

As the solitary diner resumed his seat, I turned to my companion.

"I'd like to know that man, Gamine."

"If you do, promise to introduce him to me."

"Never," I laughed.

"Jealous?" she smiled, caressing me with her eyes.

"Not a bit. But I'd never doom you to a lifelong repentance."

CHAPTER II

THE very next day I saw the "solitary diner" strolling along Piccadilly. The coincidence was remarkable; the opportunity too good to be missed. Suiting my pace to his, I kept him under observation; an inspection which was freed from all suspicion of impertinence by the fact that he was on the opposite side of the street.

If I had hoped for something unusual, some outburst of eccentricity, from a man whom Gamine had labelled "elemental," I was not doomed to disappointment.

As he strolled leisurely onwards, he was accosted by a girl selling violets. She was little more than a child, and, from the distance at which I viewed her, appeared to be as fresh and fragrant as her flowers. The "solitary diner" stopped, looked down at her, said something that caused her to raise her little face to his, then, suddenly lifting her in his arms, he kissed her openly and without shame in the face of a no doubt highly scandalized Piccadilly.

Before the smile with which I had noted this had vanished, he had purchased her entire stock-in-trade, and had begun to give away the little perfumed bunches to passers-by. Foreseeing humorous, if not dramatic possibilities, and not wishing to miss the fun, I hurriedly crossed the street.

Imagine it! A man, wholly unknown to you, dressed in a brown velveteen jacket and grey-green Homburgh hat — a man with an ivory-coloured face, emerald eyes, coal-black hair, and a most winning, a most seductive smile — a man manifestly independent of all pecuniary assistance from violets — accosts you in Pic-

cadilly, and, speaking no word, offers you a little bunch of flowers. What would you do? Take it? Leave it?

How could I help being amused? I had had no idea there were so many ways of refusing or accepting violets. When an old lady, after transfixing him at first with an outraged eye, thawed like ice in the summer of his smile — when a second lady (not old), after one glance of unmitigated suspicion, fled incontinently for safety — when a third (poorly dressed and not young) looked at his violets wistfully, shook her head, and even after he had pressed a bunch into her hand, would hardly believe that there was nothing to pay — when a fourth . . . but there —! I become tedious.

There is no doubt the ladies were his best customers. His youth — his looks — his unusual, I may even say his poetical, occupation were not without their appeal to the more romantic sex. With men — but no, I prefer to pass over masculine suspicion of gratuitous violets. Perhaps he might have done better with cigars. He had — I take pleasure in recording it — considerable success with a sweep; but there is no doubt he steered too close to Royalty in his attempt to decorate an elderly Colonel. The episode was, shall we say, unfortunate.

"I've been watching you giving them away. May I have one?"

As I spoke, I paused by his side, stepped into the place vacated by the choleric Colonel, and looked at the flower-giver with frank curiosity. Was he discomfited by the military explosion? Was he abashed at being told he was a "damned nuisance"? Not a bit! The face he turned upon me was superior to insults. He laughed. What was it that forced me to respond with delighted alacrity?

"D'you really want one?" he asked. "It's the last bunch. You heard how it was received. Perhaps I

oughtn't to have tried to put it in his buttonhole. Ah, well! if it rained violets in London some people would prefer mud — they would know it best."

"Can you wonder?" I said laughing. "With our climate! And no doubt they can't appreciate what they don't pay for. Not that we pay for mud, but we pay a great deal too much for the absence of mud, which is much the same thing."

"Pay!" he shouted, and his face expressed whimsical disgust. "I hate the word. Who wants to pay? Yet you can't move without hearing it. It's not my idea of a world. No, by Jupiter! we do things better in fairyland."

I own to being taken aback. I gazed at him in amazement, and also with circumspection. A certain wildness, hard to define, danced out at me from between his black-fringed eyelids. Past all doubt he was a remarkable experience in a London thoroughfare. One of two things alone was possible, to thank him for his flowers — and go — or to enter into his mad humour — and stay.

"Have you come from there?" I laughed — instinctively choosing the latter alternative. To my no little amazement, he answered my ridiculous question as seriously as though I had asked him if he came from Hampstead.

"Oh, I'm always there!" he answered cheerfully; then, looking closely at me, with an expression which I can only describe as conveying a "questioning hopefulness," he enquired:

"Have you got the entrée too?"

Again I was taken aback. To tell the honest truth, I did not know what to make of him. Was he poking fun at me, in return for my having poked fun at him? But no. His unrestrained eagerness had all the appearance of sincerity. It had a naïve and even wistful quality

that was unmistakably genuine. He was awaiting my answer.

"I — I don't know," I answered with an embarrassed laugh.

His face fell.

"Odd!" he murmured, more to himself than to me. "You look . . . well, perhaps I'm wrong. But I don't often make a mistake."

He seemed to express his thoughts just as they came into his head, just as a child does. I liked that. Then, too, I was influenced by the memory of Gamine. I thought to myself: "What fun it'll be to tell her of all this! How she'll bother me for an introduction!"

"Look here," I said, "there's my club. Come and have a drink."

"Don't!" he implored, half laughing, "don't spoil it all! This isn't you."

I drew back a step. What did he know about me?

"Is it the club, or the drink, you object to?" I blurted.

"Both. I never enter a club without longing to shock everyone. I've done it too" — he chuckled — "before this."

"By Jove! I've had an escape!"

"You have," he acquiesced pleasantly.

"What's wrong with drink?"

He assured me very earnestly that, far from objecting to drink, he loved it. It was the way we consumed it in clubs that repelled him. Cheerless and mechanical devotees — he termed us — performing some dismal, semi-intoxicating rite. "On a mountain-top — that's the place!" he cried. "Crowned with green leaves — toasting the sunrise. And it must be wine, red wine, generous wine, not your pale, sad spirit of the North."

I thought over this. I couldn't exactly see myself, at my age, with my occasional rheumatism, perched on

Ben Nevis "toasting the sunrise." I asked him warmly what possible reason he had for objecting to our excellent national beverage.

"For the sake of Bacchus," he proclaimed, flourishing the empty flower-basket.

Of Bacchus! I laugh now when I think of it. He referred to the scandalous old deity, the incorrigible old wine-bibber, as though he were a respectable and reliable wine-merchant, just round the corner, whose business was in imminent danger of being ruined unless I mended my ways. More than that — he alluded to him with a sort of warm personal regard — very much as Prince Henry, before he became King Henry V, might have spoken of Jack Falstaff — not with respect, but certainly with lenient and affectionate comprehension.

I believe that was what appealed to me, his belief in old pagan Bacchus, not as a legendary personage, not even as a symbol, but as a being of flesh and blood; for I, too, beneath an enforced crust of modernity, have a very soft spot for Grecian mythology.

"Joined his rout many and many a time," he confessed shamelessly. "Pure juice of the grape," he affirmed. "Wine, red wine, bottled sunshine, imprisoned folly," he vociferated.

He even spouted poetry — misquoted Keats with gusto, that passage in which the "merry damsels with faces all on flame" and the "jolly satyrs madly dancing," are likened to a "moving vintage."

A very jolly passage — perfectly delightful in a book, but slightly embarrassing when almost shouted at you in a street. Misleading, too, if taken literally — at least, that has been my experience. But this fellow, this solitary diner, assured me with vehemence that that was exactly how they carried on — exactly — *he* knew!

And, as he swore to the accuracy of the description, he seized my arm and waved it to and fro like a captured banner, and laughed aloud, the most rollicking and infectious laugh imaginable.

I was in no mood to contradict him, for, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a policeman beginning to take a suspiciously professional interest in the demonstration.

"I say," I adjured my captor nervously, "let's go somewhere else. Awfully interesting and all that — but won't do here — too public — what?"

To my subsequent amazement, I found that I had taken for granted that we were not to part.

To do him justice, he at once fell in with my suggestion, slipped his arm under mine — as simply and naturally as a child would take your hand — and, a few minutes later, we entered Green Park.

"These trees make my heart ache," he observed, pointing with his disengaged hand. "Look at them. They're like the poor wild animals in your barbaric Zoo. London parks depress me horribly. They're all railed in. They can't get out. This one — look at it, — white with dust! They call it green 'lest they might forget.'"

I remember I bantered him upon his poetical ideas, and I recall his answer too — that everyone who could feel in the right way was a poet. He said it with a laugh, so that I couldn't tell if he meant it or not.

Oh, he was full of laughter! This laughter of his was the oddest, the most whimsical, the most characteristic thing about him, and certainly the first to impress a stranger. Sometimes it was jolly, understandable, human laughter, very infectious, very endearing. And sometimes it was what I can only call elemental laughter — that is, laughter that set others laughing, but denied them all knowledge of the joke.

I find that, when I try to fit words to it, I instantly

think of nature. When I seek similes, they are invariably drawn from big things, perhaps eternal things, certainly things beyond the present compass of man's knowledge — "the singing of the spheres" will explain what I mean. And, true it is that he seemed to have discovered some wonderful and joyous secret of nature, some revelation that made up for all weariness, all sorrow, all tears, even death. Yes, that was it, he seemed to be laughing with life eternal.

We had by this time left the path, and were come to a glade overarched by trees. At his suggestion we lay down on the turf, under a close canopy of leaves.

A sense of unreality swept over me. The memory of our conversation still comes back to me, ever clearer, I think, as it recedes into the past. It invariably stirs an emotion mysteriously compounded of incredulity, faint amusement, wistful regret.

Thinking it over now, judging it in cool blood, — which, in this case, means emancipated from the intoxicating personal magnetism of the erratic being who flashed like a comet across the orbit of our quiet and humdrum lives, flashed and disappeared forever into the night of time, — I can say without exaggeration that it was one of the most extraordinary conversations that have ever taken place. I mean, of course, considering the circumstances — two men, meeting for the first time, presumably sane, and certainly arrived at years of discretion.

But first, I want to make it plain that it was extremely unlike me. Never before had I conducted myself in such a manner, and I firmly believe that never shall I do so again. I am (as the reader will find out) just an ordinary, respectable, matter-of-fact, eighteen-golf-handicap old boy with no claim to excessive eccentricity.

What I contend is — that it wasn't me, me as my

pals know me, and as I hope I know myself. Of course my share in the conversation was neither brilliant nor original. It could not be recorded here without promoting slumber, or at all events yawns, but as a foil it was excellent, and I ought to be satisfied now with being privileged to play the humble rôle of Boswell to his Johnson.

No, it was not my conversation that amazed me afterwards. It was my mental attitude, the something that woke up, and welcomed, and responded, and glowed, and even metaphorically jumped for joy!—the something that I lost when I was six, and that I still think of wistfully, tenderly, when I have time to spare it a thought.

The questions I asked him!—personal, searching, indiscreet. The answers he gave me—outspoken, unblushing, staggering in their primitive simplicity, and always with an undercurrent of jovial humour, as of a stranger from some far less complicated civilisation, immensely tickled by the ways and notions of an earth-dweller.

I was consumed with curiosity to find out all about him, but I cannot say that his account of himself—though apparently concealing nothing—left me any the wiser.

When I enquired what his occupation was, he made me feel as if I had asked a skylark what it usually did with itself.

"I live, I learn, I love," he chuckled. "Life is given us to enjoy."

My common-sense, or sense of propriety—call it what you will—must have cropped up in spite of my metamorphosis, for in answer to some platitude he cried out at me:

"Don't you believe it! The world doesn't want to be made better. It wants to be understood. Can't you feel

it? I know you can't see it, or hear it — but can't you *feel* it? It's hiding close to us now, like a lovely nymph, — yes, even here, in this dusty old park, — crying, 'Come and know me.'"

I warmed to that. I have always been partial to nymphs.

When, flying off at a tangent to one of Gamine's suppositions, I asked if he were married, his merriment knew no bounds. To hear him, you would have thought that the holy state of matrimony was a practical joke, like mixing boots with shoes in hotels, outside bedroom doors. I discovered to my surprise that I, too, was laughing consumedly. Scandalous!

"Is it necessary to be married in order to love?" he asked, raising himself on his elbow, and looking at me with dancing eyes.

"N—o, not exactly," I answered doubtfully, then, with more hopefulness: "But it focusses it."

"Like a microscope?"

"Well — like a telescope."

"Same thing. You magnify what you are gazing at out of all sense of proportion. You bring it too close — that's marriage. No. I'd rather feel far away from the stars. They're something to look up to; something to live up to."

He broke off, but the idea evidently clung to him, for he came back to it.

"Marriage? No. Supposing I fell in love with a girl, why should I instantly yearn to pay her dressmaker's bills?"

The very idea of associating this will-o'-the-wisp with dressmaker's bills made me smile.

"I couldn't fall in love with a woman unless her dressmaker was a sort of gratuitous insult," he assured me with unusual earnestness.

"Not gratuitous!" I corrected, with feeling.

"No," he chuckled. "Certainly not gratuitous. You had me there."

I lay still and thought, or rather tried to think.

"As far as I can see," I began doubtfully, "you're a walking danger to girls."

That, of course, amused him immensely.

"Yes," I went on, "what with your heterodox ideas on marriage, and your habit of going about the country professionally living, and learning, and loving — you must often get involved. I say" — I turned to him impulsively — "you must draw the line somewhere?"

He looked at me with great good-humour. "I draw it at plain women, and dull women, and artificial women. I've trained myself not to see them. You've no idea how it tends to beautify life. Oh, there are plenty of lines — "

"Every sort, apparently, except marriage lines," I commented with a twinkle.

But he continued, just as if I had not spoken: "Perfection — that's what one sighs for — just as one worships the beautiful, and craves for the impossible."

He paused, sighed, stretched out his arms and cried: "Love! What is it? It has been called by a thousand names. But you can't get away from the fact that it's a winged desire. It comes. It goes. It's something calling to something. When it calls, I obey."

"All very well! But if everyone acted like you, there would be the devil to pay. We can't just dash in. Besides — what about children . . . ?"

"Children!" His voice rang joyous. "I love children."

"I don't see that your sort of love provides for them at all satisfactorily. Even the birds build nests."

"So could we!" he cried eagerly, and I could see he was as pleased with the idea as though he, too, were a child. "No difficulty about that! Bracken makes a

jolly good nest in dry weather. I've slept in it many a time."

My matter-of-fact self would have shrugged its shoulders had it not been lying on them.

"In your scheme of life what becomes of them?" I asked with an interest that would not be repressed.

"I'd people the mountains with them," he cried with enthusiasm. "You'd meet them everywhere, in woods, in glens, among the heather — happy bands of them, dear little people! Think, man, think!" He jerked himself up, he waved his arms. "No nurses, no doctors, no schools. All play, and joy, and freedom. It would be a Midsummer-Night's Dream come true."

"People the mountains! Sounds like baby-farming to me. You'd have sanitary inspectors cropping up — protesting . . . "

"I'd have no inspectors in my world," he broke in hotly. "Who wants to be inspected? And you're wrong. There would be no infant mortality. Fresh air, cold bathing, early hours, return to nature, all healthy and happy."

"How'd you feed them?" I asked doubtfully — "Cows?"

"Yes," he cried joyously; "that's a topping idea! Cows. Herds of them. Highland for choice. Dotting the landscape. No harm in a cow. Eh?"

Then, catching my eye, he burst into shouts of laughter.

When we had calmed down, he treated me to a new idea of his whimsical personality, for, lying there upon the brown and weary turf, he began to talk softly to me of woods and hills and running water, of dawn and dusk — of moonlight and mist — in a way that I found both fascinating and unfamiliar. I fell a willing victim to the magic of his mood. Yes, I was more than content to listen, and let the world go by — the mechanical

old world, full steam ahead, straining towards the future—while I lay there enthralled with an enchanted present that might never come again.

Oh, that was the side of him that appealed—that allured! He had the power to agitate, if not to lift, a veil. Even while talking of familiar things, he gave the impression of unfamiliarity—of lives other than ours—invisible to grosser sight, but indissolubly one with the lovely and transient moods of unravished nature. To me, listening, the roar of Piccadilly became a slumbrous and natural note like the voice of running water, and the smoke-begrimed trees of the London Park became again the children of forests untouched by men.

And at that a great desire came upon me. It grew and grew, and at last it burst the bounds of silence.

"I say!" I cried impulsively, "you must come and stay with us!"

The moments of anxiety during which he appeared to be considering my proposal were intolerable. I realised then how much he had bewitched me—how much I cared.

"Who are us?" he questioned with his curious smile.

"My wife and—"

"*What!*" he shouted. "You don't mean to say you're married! And I said all that! You should have told me. Probably got children too. Cows sounded terribly like the real thing. By Jupiter! I *have* put my foot into it!"

I reassured him, and pressed the invitation.

"Loch Voil?" he mused. "No, I don't know it. A loch, a boat, a burn, hills, woods? Why, my dear fellow, it's Paradise! Just suit me. I always felt I was born for Paradise. No lost souls outside the door? No trippers, I hope?"

"No," I cried, beaming on him. "The motor *char-à-bancs* all stop at Balquhidder, two miles off. It's our loch, our burn, our hills. We are monarchs — in spirit at all events — of all we survey. My wife will be delighted to see you. Pam too — that's my little daughter. You'll fall in love with her — everyone does. By Jove! It's queer — damned queer! — but you've taken a weight off my chest. I can just see you there."

He laughed, very pleased with the sincerity of my satisfaction. Then, sobering, enquired:

"Any roads? I hate roads."

"Only one. It runs past our house. You needn't mind it. It leads us home. Besides, it lures you to all sorts of places, but never gets there. I never get tired of it. It gets more beautiful every mile. But it's a doomed thing. It trails away to die unseen near Inverlochlarig, probably in some lonely hollow of the hills."

"I like that," his eyes sparkled. "That's good! Poor old road, worn-out, coiling itself off to die like a wounded snake, and the hills triumphant, blotting out its very memory with bracken. What a time we'll have! Of course I'll come. Thanks awfully. You'll make a jolly host. Ledecriech? Have I got it right? Two miles from Balquhidder, you said? To-day fortnight? That will be the twenty-fifth. Righto, I'll be there!"

We parted. I watched him merge into the stream flowing citywards. He looked like a young god among mortals. I sighed involuntarily. All at once the trees struck me as being lonely. The sunshine, too, seemed to have changed its quality.

I turned away, smiling somewhat sadly at myself. Then, suddenly, I sobered. For there came to me the preposterous fact that neither of us knew the other's name!

CHAPTER III

My wife and little daughter met me at the station of Balquhidder, a few days after the interview recounted in the last chapter. They were escorted by my three white bull-terriers — Pixie, the grandmother; Buster and Friend, the grandchildren. All five were full of love. All spelt home. I waved enthusiastically.

Outside the station, Kitty, too, had a welcome from and for me. Her neigh of recognition, and the alacrity with which she accepted a piece of bread, bespoke as much equine satisfaction as a pony usually condescends to bestow upon a man-ridden world. Altogether from a human, canine, and equine point of view, we were as joyous and united a family as ever filled, followed, and drew a pony-trap.

I looked round upon the scenery with happiness — more, with affection. Pleasant may be the "sweet, shady side of Piccadilly" beloved of Lamb, and Goldsmith, and Johnson; but give me the "Braes of Balquhidder" — they come nearer to my heart's desire.

Every turn of the romantic road beckoned and promised. None broke its word. Every hill we climbed, and every declivity we descended — "alluring up and enticing down" — led us farther into a land of enchantment.

Gold was squandered lavishly by the late afternoon. Radiance flooded mountain and valley. It brought into prominence a thousand facets of this jewelled land — wet rocks on distant crags sparkled like diamonds, ruddy stems of ancestral pines glowed like sun-kissed rubies. The hills showed faintly, steeped in warm,

quivering colour, for was not the purple heather in full bloom? Not a wandering air was abroad. Nature seemed holding her breath. Even the delicate leaves of the silver birches forgot to tremble. All was peace. All was beauty.

Mary and I walked up the hills, to the relief of Kitty and with the full approval of the dogs. Pam, in sole possession of the trap, and permitted to hold the loose ends of the reins, was no doubt indulging in dreams of a useful life — a life in which she could do all the things we hoped and prayed she would be able to do some day.

"Well, what have you got to tell me?" I asked, for some announcement, that had not yet been announced, was plainly imminent to a husband's eye.

When informed not only that Jessie (our governess) had departed, but that her successor was already in command, I stared at my wife with a humorous appreciation of her qualities. Mary's mind is so strong, so self-reliant, so adamantine, that I often find myself leaning up against it, as though it were a rock. Of course I am accustomed to her firm decisions, to her method of arriving at conclusions as the woman walks — but this! "*Le roi est mort, vive le roi!*" — this juggling with governesses! It was beyond me.

For a few minutes I kept silent as we jogged onwards, then my meditations became audible: "Does she know anything about health? Is — is she motherly?"

Mary laughed aloud, and Pam — eager to welcome even an incomprehensible joke — joined in with her clear treble.

I waited patiently.

"It's very obvious you haven't seen her," said Mary, sobering. "She's only twenty-two."

"Surely there's such a thing as the motherly instinct, quite apart from all question of age? Look at Pam

with her dolls. Ah, well, there's only one infallible test — do *you* like her, Pam?"

"I love her," said Pam simply.

"Then I'm satisfied. Gee-up!" and Kitty, spasmodically enlivened by my shouts, quickened her pace for exactly four steps.

Now, Mary calls me a sentimentalist, an idealist, a goose. It is possible that I may be all three. True it is that — given certain characteristics necessary to Pam's welfare — I would proceed in the important matter of selecting a governess with as great a fastidiousness as though I were purchasing a piece of old Chinese porcelain. Mary, I need hardly say, is not so particular. Pam has only one craving to satisfy. Expressed tersely, and in the form of questions, our three requirements run thus:

"Can she teach?" from Mary.

"Can she harmonise?" from me.

"Can she love?" from Pam.

And I am by no means sure that, of the three, Pam's requirement is not the most essential.

"I only hope," said I, touching Kitty lightly with the whip, for by this time we had once more taken our places in the pony-trap — "I only hope she's appropriate. I have a theory," I continued, as neither of my companions appeared to fathom my last remark, "that the really finished governess should be able to take on the hue of her immediate surroundings like — well, like the chameleon. My grievance is that they never vary. No one so far has even faintly reflected Balquhidder. Now, living here as we do, we want — we must have — my dear" — I turned impulsively to Mary — "quick! for Heaven's sake! What is she like?"

"She's beautiful, Daddy," shrilled Pam.

"Beautiful!" I ejaculated; then looked again at Mary: "Is this true — or just Pam?"

Mary considered, yes, considered as placidly, as dispassionately as though I had asked her what sort of a day they had had yesterday.

"She's certainly pretty. Yes, she's all right."

I did not allow myself to be discouraged. I may be doing Mary an injustice (I hope not), but I firmly believe she is capable of describing the *Venus de Milo* as "all right."

"What's she doing now?" I asked with interest.

"It's her free day. She's gone to Killin. Walking there and back."

"Good Lord! That's twenty-two miles."

"She's like that. You'll see. We'll probably pass her on the road; I told her to be back by seven o'clock."

"What's her name?"

I put the question with anxiety. Shakespeare may not see anything important in a name — but I do. I shrank in anticipation from Jemima, or Mary-Ann.

"Diana," said Mary.

Involuntarily I checked Kitty. She edged to the wrong side of the road, and began to graze. I heeded her not.

"Diana!" I shouted. "Ye gods! Why, this is the very place for her! Diana — the virgin huntress! What a coincidence! Diana! O ye hills and little brooks!"

Then I stopped, for Mary was gazing at me with a smile which I always find embarrassing. Of course, I like her to be maternal — it is in the bond — but why should she feel protective, and smilingly compassionate? Why? I reiterate — *Why?*

"Don't you see how important it is?" I cried.

Mary continued to smile. Pam laughed. Flashing a reproachful glance at my daughter's abnormal sense of humour, I swept on:

"Just think! — beautiful, tireless, young — *and* Diana! Almost could I dance!"

"*Do,* Daddy!" encouraged Pam.

I looked at my daughter with parental dignity.

"I said 'almost,' Pam."

There is no doubt that Pam was to a certain extent responsible for my mood. At each turn of the road, as we jogged onwards, my daughter would exclaim:

"Perhaps we'll see her now! What d'you think, Daddy? D'you think she'll be there?"

And I would reply: "I hope so. Wait a minute. Now — now — now! No, by gad! she's not there. Perhaps round the next turning."

And we would both speculate, craning our necks, looking eagerly ahead, longing — for what? For Diana. For flying footsteps. For fluttering draperies. For the track of a nymph.

It even resolved itself — at Pam's instigation — into a game. Who should see her first — prize one penny — to be paid by Daddy. Mary smiled upon us. In her eyes we were both children.

"There!" cried Pam suddenly. "There she is!"

I wish — *how* I wish! — I could transfer to paper something of the radiant impression I received — the young, lissom figure — the fair hair encircling her head like an aureole, or a glory of netted sunbeams — the grace of her — the perfect coördination of every movement — the easy, swinging, effortless stride. She carried her hat in her hand. She moved through the sunlight imparting the glad sensation of joy, joy in life, joy in movement, joy in calm, contemplative thoughts. As we jogged ever nearer and nearer to her, I gazed entranced, spellbound! Did goddesses again walk the earth?

"One penny, Daddy," reminded Pam.

"She cuts out children's clothes beautifully," murmured Mary.

I believe we were introduced. There was in the gracious and dignified inclination of that sunny head an indication — oh, very delicate, very subtle! — of a charming personality; a little reserved, perhaps, a little aloof, and for that very reason all the more appealing to admiration.

Oh, I was not falling in love! When one has "hitched one's waggon to a star," one does not swear allegiance even to the light that falls from Olympus. Besides, it were fatal to fall in love with a goddess. At the same time, my dream had come true. I had prayed for something exquisitely appropriate, something intensely sympathetic to all the influences I loved. Well, here it was, and Mary informed me calmly that we were paying it fifty-five pounds a year! I could have burst into Homeric laughter.

But, while we are discussing her, she is waiting in the sunlit road looking at my wife, who, seated in the pony-trap, is leaning forward and talking to her with the grave sweetness that always characterises the sweet lady of my choice.

What they said is immaterial, it is the impression that matters — these two conversing, the heather-clad hills shining softly in the warm afternoon haze, a peep of loch gleaming between clumps of foliage, and no shadow of coming events to darken the brightness of the radiant hour.

CHAPTER IV

I REMEMBER our drawing-room striking me that evening after dinner as an especially delightful place. Far from partaking of the benighted loneliness of the pines, and loch, and high hills, all of which can be seen from its windows, it radiated light, and warmth, and sociability.

I remember gazing at my two companions with infinite satisfaction. Their mere presence made my excellent Cabaña taste more ethereal. Could Pam but have been present, my cup of proprietary pleasure would have overflowed. But Pam was better engaged — for I am credibly informed that the fairies claim her the very moment she falls asleep.

Both Mary and Diana were working — useful work. Mary was taking hers seriously, giving it the whole of her practical and capable mind, regarding it from time to time with critical eyes and head held slightly on one side — with murmurs addressed to Diana — "D'you think I might — ?" or, "Would it look better if I — ?" murmurs not too intelligible; owing to her habit of storing pins between her lips.

I didn't mind that. I wanted to admire her, not to understand her. I looked at her with smiling approval — the sort of approval with which a man regards a prize picked from the lucky-bag of life; hugging himself as being an extremely clever fellow, when, in reality, he has only been fortunate far beyond his deserts.

Diana, seated a little farther off, was plying her needle deftly, but mechanically. I believe she was almost unconscious of the little garment on her lap. She,

too, was a pretty picture. Her fair hair, bent over her work, vied with the gold of the lamplight. Were it not that she murmured softly from time to time in answer to Mary's interrogations, I would have sworn that her mind was no more in our drawing-room than were the little bats zigzagging in the starlight outside.

"By Jove!" I cried all at once; "I've asked him to come and stay with us."

"Who?" demanded Mary.

She listened to my account of the violets, of Green Park, and of the invitation, with an amazement that would have been wholly flattering, had I not been conscious of a background of mild disapprobation.

Diana, on the contrary, was listening with a lively sympathy that pleased me very much. She even seemed excited. Her blue eyes danced into mine. There was something in them — something —

But Mary recalled me to facts.

"Really!" she exclaimed. "The things you do! You can't be trusted alone. Jack — *do* attend! D'you mean to tell me he's coming here on the 25th — and you don't even know his name?"

"No, no," I cried virtuously — "never do a thing like that. Name? Dangerfield. I found out rather cleverly. You remember Frank Shorter, little, stout chap, dined with us last spring at the Savoy? Well, he saw us going into Green Park — told me he'd met him somewhere — said he was a 'rum un.' He wanted to tell me some yarn or other about him, but I wouldn't listen. Gossiping little beast! That's all — except — "

"Well?" prompted Mary.

"Except that he said something queer, just as I left."

Now, why in the sacred name of goodness did I not keep that to myself? It just slipped out. But that is no excuse. Naturally, Mary was all agog to know what Shorter had said — and, though Diana maintained a

discreet silence, I could tell by her face that she was every whit as inquisitive as Mary. As I must unbosom myself to someone, I may as well take the reader into my confidence.

Shorter, then, had advised me — with that detestable snigger of his — not to introduce him to my womenfolk. For which impertinence I had yearned to kick him, but, judging the retort learned not only more dignified, but more likely to confound his illiterate soul, I made answer that the ladies of my household were all like Cæsar's wife. Whereat his jaw fell, and I left him gazing at my stately progress up Piccadilly with all the suspicion that that impeccable spouse was so far above.

There was my dilemma. Of course it was out of the question to repeat Shorter's words. At the same time I did want to say something — to drop a hint. It was of Diana I was thinking. Mary was a fixed and serene star, but Diana — though a luminary of extreme interest and uncommon beauty — had "swum into my ken" so recently and she was by no means easy to place.

And then I had a real "brain-wave." I would warn Diana by pretending to warn Mary.

"What did he say, Jack? Why d'you stop?"

"He said — or rather he implied —"

When Mary sighs like that it always confuses me. I hurried on:

"He insinuated — but you mustn't think I attached any importance — Dash it all! what he said was this —" and then I told Mary — and, through her, Diana — somewhat of the unaccountable spell flung by my new acquaintance, and the incredulous, indeed snorting indignation it aroused in material souls like that possessed by the miserable Shorter.

When I concluded, I found my audience was listen-

ing attentively. There was a moment of silence, then Mary's placid voice was heard to remark that he sounded nice, and that she was prepared to like him.

"Oh, you'll like him all right — that is, if your sane mind can accept his partial insanity. I only hope" — and here I looked covertly at Diana's glowing face — "I only hope you won't fall under his weird influence — that is, not as much as I did."

But no sooner had I uttered these fateful words than I saw in a flash that I had done the very thing I had set out not to do. Mary let fall her work. And Diana's eyes! — they were stars! A fool had rushed in where angels might well have feared to tread. I groaned inwardly, then, resigning myself to the inevitable, I sat back in my chair and folded my arms.

"What sort of influence?" demanded my wife.

"Well, I forgot my years. I forgot my dignity. Almost did I forget you."

Mary smiled. "And you think when I see him I'll forget you?"

"Heaven forbid!"

"At all events, I would never forget myself."

"Ah, but we can be so many selves. That's the difficulty. There's one's best self — and one's second-best self. There's the self one knows, and the self one doesn't want to know."

"And the self who talks nonsense?" suggested Mary.

"Tell us what you felt," pleaded Diana.

"I felt," said I, looking gravely at her, "I felt as though I were developing a photographic negative — very much in the dark. Then, as I watched and waited, something, a shadow that was really a light, grew and grew, and became a world peopled with things, beings, presences I never expected to see. I felt all that, and more."

Diana was listening eagerly — too eagerly.

"But it's all illusion," I continued hastily. "You mustn't trust it, or him. When he goes, you look, and it's all gone. Then you laugh at yourself. I did. If you are wise, you laugh cheerfully. If you are foolish, you laugh sadly. That's why" — here I addressed myself pointedly to Mary — "that's why I want to save you from any possible sadness."

"You think I'm foolish?" demanded Mary. There was just the suggestion of a smile.

"I do not. But I know your kind heart. I know your trusting disposition. You are capable of gazing at him with the eye of faith. You may not believe that he cannot be believed. Great Scot! you may even try to mother him, as Pam tried to mother the hedgehog. I think the moral is obvious."

Mary murmured something full of unimaginative common-sense about the folly of comparing men to hedgehogs (bless her heart, she knows as little of the one as of the other!), but I shook a dubious head.

"You never can tell. He looks very like a man, but —"

"What —?" whispered Diana, awestruck.

"Ah, that is the question. He's been described, by a very competent authority, as a lone wolf. But, though there is undoubtedly something in the simile, it could be bettered. Though disconcertingly natural, there's no savagery in him. He'll probably 'roar you as gently as any sucking dove.' He would not eat Little Red Riding-Hood. No, he would love her. That's the trouble."

"Is he lonely?" asked Mary.

"Is he nice-looking?" asked Diana.

They spoke in the same breath.

"The reply to both these questions is in the affirmative, but — he is said to be dangerous."

"Pooh!" said Mary. She paused, and it struck me with dismay that she was enjoying herself immensely,

then she asked: "Do you realise, dear, that you are saying the very things to make us love him?"

I suppose my face must have reflected the tragic muse, for all at once Diana laughed with extreme heartiness. It was the most purely natural sound imaginable. But there was in it a note — a quality — that set me speculating. It stirred some emotion, elusive, fleeting. It suggested — what? I hardly knew. Something purely physical, perhaps; like the uncontrolled gladness of a wild young animal. It bubbled up and out of Diana as though she were not responsible for it — for all it suggested, I mean; unaware of it, most likely.

But, for me, there was something more in that laugh — some mystery — some memory. It puzzled and haunted me till I went to bed; then, just as I turned out my lamp, I remembered the laugh I had listened to in Green Park.

CHAPTER V

It is my privilege — and one that I value highly — to enjoy a nightly chat with Mary while she is occupied in brushing her hair. A conference established solely for the furtherance of friendly relations is no small contributor to harmony. It is like that public benefactor the piano-tuner.

Entering her room, then, for that purpose upon the night of my return home, I found her seated at the toilet-table. Sinking into an armchair, I gave myself up to the soothing influence of the hour and of the place. I was in no hurry to talk.

The light of two candles placed on the toilet-table shed a soft luminance round the room. The solemn hush of the night without, and the slumbrous quiet of the house within — the soft and tinted twilight that dispelled darkness without entirely robbing it of its mystery — the familiar objects, endeared by long association, metamorphosed by this light that was no light into mere suggestions of possibilities — and the presence and rhythmic movements of the other occupant of the room — all contributed to weave a spell of which I gratefully acknowledge the charm.

I should be tempted to compare Mary, thus occupied, and at this darkling hour, to a night-bird preening its feathers — a wise owl for choice — were I not aware that a pretty woman brushing her hair needs no simile and for grace of movement and beauty of pose could give points to any bird ever hatched.

From where I sat I could see her reflected face in

the shining mirror, with something contemplative and absorbed in its expression — the white gleam of her rounded arm as it plied its graceful task — the involuntary movement of her dark head as it met and responded to the reiterated pressure of the brush, a movement that made me smile, for it suggested statements full of familiar emphasis, as though the lady were taking up as strong and as unassailable a position in the land of dreams as she was wont to do in the world of realities.

What does a woman think about when she is brushing her hair? Do her emancipated locks summon up memories of childhood? Or, sweeping her still farther into the "backward and abysm of time," do they recall fugitive recollections of life in the domestic tree, when her hair was never up, never brushed, never made use of, save by her arboreal mate in moments of misplaced enthusiasm?

"Jack."

I sprang from the past to the present.

"When did you say he was coming?" — then, receiving my answer, "Harry comes next day."

"Harry?" I was bewildered. "Which Harry?"

I was at once informed that it was the right Harry, the only Harry, Harry Vernon, and that it was extremely careless of me to have forgotten that we had agreed to ask him to spend a week with us on account of his loneliness. There you have my Mary all over — her beautiful mission in life is to prevent the lonely from realising their loneliness. I believe I returned an absent-minded affirmative.

The idea of Harry Vernon gave me "furiously to think." Stuffed with all honourable virtues, a man as sound as an uncracked cocoanut, he was yet a sworn enemy to fancy, the inveterate foe of all those who live in the light of imagination. His devotion to Mary —

all honour to an honourable friendship — was based upon the erroneous assumption that they stood together, shoulder to shoulder as it were, upon the rock of common-sense. He was unable to see that she perched upon it lightly, whereas he was built into it with cement. Hugging this delusion, he lent her books to prove that their rock was the only rock in the universe, and that nothing but what could be seen from their rock had any existence. If a glorious angel from heaven appeared before him, he would wonder anxiously what he had eaten for supper. Reflecting on all this, I came to the incontrovertible conclusion that he would clash with my guest.

Touching lightly on this apprehension, I observed the lady in the looking-glass to become grave.

"If —" She hesitated. "If you would only take him a little more seriously, Jack."

I gave vent to a sudden bark of amazement.

"Seriously! My dear! I don't believe I do anything else. I don't see how I could. I know that when he's here I feel ten years older, and that's serious enough at my time of life."

"There you go. You see! That's what I mean. Your humour —"

"My humour! What's wrong with it? It's good humour. It conceals a laugh."

"That's just it. It conceals."

I looked at Mary. She had a pretty air of triumph. Heaven forbid that I should grudge her a satisfaction so innocent and so natural! No passion for economy puddled the clear current of my appreciation. Is it not always man's privilege to pay?

Leaning forward, I patted her arm. I smiled.

"As long as you don't ask me to take *you* too seriously. My constitution wouldn't stand a life sentence. But honestly, my dear, he *is* a responsibility. That's

how I feel it. If I were a strong, self-sufficient character, I wouldn't care. But I've a weakness for being liked, so I do care. It's rather subtle. His liking you is the cause, and his disliking me is the effect. I suffer by comparison. Oh, it's quite understandable. The more he likes, the more he dislikes."

"You're wrong. You're quite wrong. I'd hate it if you weren't. Harry doesn't dislike—"

"Oh, my dear! Don't I feel it! It just oozes out of him. No man ever had the courage of his extremely conscientious prejudices to quite the same extent. When he's here, I can see him studying me through those non-committal eyes of his, scrupulously anxious to do me justice, yet asking himself with astonishment: 'What on earth *did* she see?'"

As Mary's eyebrows appeared to demand further explanations, I continued:

"It's as if you had shown him some homely article you had rashly bought and still amazingly liked. If he had been left to himself, he wouldn't have noticed it at all; but just because *you* chose it out of a hundred and one things in the shop, and because he has the most implicit trust in your taste, he tries hard—but quite unsuccessfully—to see it through your dear prejudiced eyes."

There fell a little silence, during which I looked hopefully into Mary's slightly bewildered face. Similes always puzzle her. I believe she suspects them, too, of concealing. Had my meaning gone home? Not in its entirety, I feared. And yet—I had done my best. I clothed my thought in the atmosphere beloved of women—the atmosphere of shops. By alluding to myself simply and modestly as a "purchase," I sought to recall the glamour, the competitive enthusiasm, the moment of triumph. That I had not succeeded in so doing was more my misfortune than her fault, for I

am positive that a less ostentatious woman never left the bargain counter.

My efforts, however, were not absolutely without result. For a moment my interlocutress looked at me, as she might have looked at an approaching bus — the right number — in a word, *her* bus! Her only difficulty — plainly visible in her eyes — was could she board me. She tried; she failed. To pursue the metaphor, Mary was left all forlorn on the pavement; while I rumbled off into the distance.

She sighed. "You *are* funny, Jack! The things you say! It would never occur to me to say things like that. I suppose that's where Pam gets her extraordinary ideas. All the same, I do wish you would appreciate Harry. It would make things more comfortable when he's here. Just feel you like him, and he'll like you."

I gave this altruistic suggestion the consideration it undoubtedly merited. "Like?" I mused. "It sounds simple, but is it as simple as it sounds? Can one like to order? I doubt it. I never could manage to like the things that were said to be good for me when I was a boy. Now, don't look sad. I'll try my best, and — who knows — perhaps we'll fall in love. He's an acquired taste, and you've acquired him first; that's all. Mind you, I do appreciate him — especially in absence. Oh, I concede that he's solid all through, and — and wholesome, like suet pudding. You couldn't have a better friend. Surely that's enough appreciation from a husband. Platonically, I present him with you. He ought to fall on my neck with gratitude. But what gets me is why the generous recognition of virtues doesn't advance one a little inch in their possessor's estimation. It isn't fair. I shouldn't wonder, now, if your precious Harry imputes to me all that I am so careful not to impute to him. He gives me that impression, anyhow. It's rather quaint. You, he, and I — we certainly make

the oddest triangle. All the same, I'd prefer . . . Mary! I've got an idea!"

My loquacity depresses Mary. It doesn't seem natural to her that a man should talk so much, and so little to the point. Even the flush of an imminent idea left her cold.

"Be a good fairy," I pleaded. "Wave your wand and transform the triangle into a square. Ask Gamine to visit us — Gamine — you know! Lady Desmond. We'll contrive for her a double debt to pay. If these two fellows don't hit it off — they won't, you know — she'll keep them so busy they'll hardly notice it."

Mary paused, hair-brush in hand. She looked sceptical, also ridiculously young. And then I eagerly reminded her that Gamine and I had met the solitary diner in London, and that I was half pledged to introduce him to her if I got to know him. "She said any woman would fall in love with him," I concluded thoughtfully.

Mary resumed operations. "Just the sort of thing she would say," she remarked with delicate scorn, over her shoulder.

"And repent it ever after."

"Just the sort of thing she wouldn't do."

We shared a very companionable laugh.

"I believe you're half in love with her," said Mary, a little wistfully.

"To be half in love is not to be in love at all," I propounded, smiling. But to this she demurred.

"Look here, Mary, just to show you how you misjudge me, I'll confess I had schemes of pairing her off with old Vernon. No, no, not permanently. I only meant they might waste their time together here — take each other off our hands."

I could see Mary trying to visualise this — trying and failing.

"No," she said decidedly. "Never do at all. They're not suited — opposites really. He hates personalities. He can't stand a woman who chatters. He's never said so, but I know."

"Funny old box, locked, corded, and sealed," I chuckled. "How d'you know there's anything in it? Might be bricks. What on earth d'you find to talk to him about?"

But Mary could not remember. She felt, however, that he did not seek her society to be talked to; but to be made to feel at home; to be allowed to be silent sociably, and without interruption. Sometimes they sat in profound and sympathetic voicelessness for so long that he forgot she was there at all, and started to read a newspaper. The humour of this tickled her immensely — for a less vain woman never lived. Sometimes — evidently feeling impelled to do something definite, and sensible, and rather difficult — he tried to improve her bridge. There had been many lessons. They dealt hands, and he taught her to declare. The conversation was strictly confined to bridge. Those tête-à-têtes seem to have been as exciting as a Quaker meeting.

All this was imparted to me in driblets, as Mary flitted here and there about the shadowy room like the soft, wise owl to which I have been tempted to compare her. Now and then would come a little laugh. Of course I knew it all before, but I was deceitful enough to feign ignorance, just to enjoy the pleasure of listening again to her artless confidences.

I could picture it so well — these two — one on either side of a little table. Old Vernon, more serious than any hanging judge, laying down the cards and the law at the same time — and Mary replying to his rare questions with pathetic but hopeful inaccuracy.

"So you see — " concluded Mary. "He wouldn't appeal to your friend Gamine."

I gave this my consideration, and was bound to confess that she was right. From what I knew of Gamine, she would not be content with the mere dealing of hands. Moreover, a sealed masculine box would be to her an incentive to energetic and burglarious action. And as for joining anyone, man, woman, or child, in a conspiracy of silence — the idea was unthinkable. Still, I wanted to have her at Ledecriech, and said so.

Gamine's prospective hostess sighed. Encouraged to express herself without restraint, she admitted that she was dubious — the lady in question flitted from castle to castle — her frocks were "dreams" and her hats aroused emotions. Finally, I was asked with a dramatic gesture if I could picture her here.

I cast my eyes round Mary's bedroom, but the sight of its owner (irresistible now in a fascinating kimono) gave me pause. Misplaced facetiousness would, I foresaw clearly, be prejudicial to my hopes. With an earnestness that equalled her own, I assured her that Gamine's simple, sincere, and unspoilt disposition could not and should not be judged by her clothes. I gave it as my profound conviction that she would rather eat bread and cheese under a hedge with a kindred spirit than partake of ortolans with the Pope of Rome. With inconceivable guile I even hinted that she was lonely!

The letter of invitation was as good as written before I had ceased to speak.

I was on the point of leaving the room when Mary enquired what I thought of Diana. I expressed approval.

"Of course," I added, "it's difficult to judge her in a drawing-room."

"Ah," said Mary, both gratified and astonished. "More appropriate in a school-room? Fancy *you* seeing that!"

I suppressed a smile as I explained that what I meant

was that Diana did not seem quite at home in a house. I further confessed my inability to see Diana professionally at all.

"Does she look like a governess to you?" I asked dispassionately.

Greatly to my satisfaction, Mary saw my point at once.

"Why shouldn't a governess be pretty?" she asked.

"Ah! But Diana isn't merely pretty, she's beautiful — and a governess has no more right to be beautiful than a man has to carry firearms without a licence. Besides, she gives me a very curious impression. Of course I've hardly seen her yet — and anyway you won't believe — "

"Oh, go on, Jack. You're the most irritating man I know."

"Well, I'll let you into the secret. She's only half a girl, and consequently" — here I looked my sympathy — "consequently, my poor dear, you have engaged only half a governess."

Mary, who was facing the mirror, turned round and stared at me. I nodded.

"Only half — ! Preposterous! And what's the other half?"

"A nymph."

"Oh!" cried Mary, turning from me with every sign of indignation. "I might have known!"

"You certainly might have known," I acquiesced blandly, "but you didn't. It's my discovery. I doubt if even Diana knows it. A nymph! Personally, I feel as excited as if you had engaged a centaur — who is only half a man; or a mermaid — who is only half a tail."

It did not take long for Mary to recover her good-humour. She loses it so seldom that when it does evaporate I rather welcome the change. All the same,

I could see that my information — conceived, it must be admitted, in a spirit of pure phantasy — had given her food for uneasy speculation. I could read her thoughts — were they not mirrored in her clear, brown eyes? They can be expressed in one little word of three letters — Pam.

"Jack," she said suddenly, "d'you think we are doing our best for the child?"

The question came straight from her mother's heart. How could I be other than moved? Mary's loving solicitude for Pam is the most beautiful thing in the world.

I went up to her and laid my hand on her shoulder. Her eyes met mine. Then — in answer to a faint shadow of doubt, of uncertainty, as to whether I, a notorious disporter on the surface, were alive to the serious deeps of existence — I earnestly besought her to remember that even as she concealed her heart in a mist of beautiful silence, I concealed mine in a mist of foolish words.

For answer, she caught my hand, the hand on her shoulder, and pressed the back of it to her soft cheek — held it there a moment, then pushed it away with a little telltale laugh.

CHAPTER VI

And now I come to a subject that fascinates me — I refer to my impressions of Diana. A poet, in a moment of unguarded and regrettable autobiography, has written:

> "My only books were women's looks,
> And folly all they taught me."

I pity him. If in those pages of brightness and mystery he found nothing but folly, he was wholly unworthy to peruse them. A man finds what he looks for — and I found much that was delightful in Diana.

It is curious — looking back now on my first impressions — to find how intuitively correct they were. I must have been inspired. Even the fanciful surmise with which I had teased Mary was, when I came to examine it, but the laughing domino of a truth.

Half a girl, half a nymph! Many a true word has been uttered in jest. And, if it were so in this instance, alluring were the reality so surmised. Diana wholly a girl would be Diana wholly a governess. But — half a nymph . . . ! Ah, that gave birth to possibilities that beckoned, but which, when I seek to clothe them in words, dissolve into shimmering mist, even as the nymphs themselves dissolve whenever I come near.

Of course, I know only too well that my family — especially Mary — will raise their eyebrows when they read this. I know what they will think. Even Pam, fairy Pam, asked upon one occasion by some indiscreet person what her father did, replied: "Daddy writes

nonsense"; then added gravely: "But I don't think he writes as much nonsense as he talks."

Of course — she may have meant it as a compliment.

As for Mary, she harangued me from her rock of common-sense.

"For goodness' sake, don't take her mind off her work," she said to me, a day or two after my return from London.

"You're right," I replied mechanically — for, even though failing to catch her remark, through being interrupted in my work, a still, small voice from somewhere in my anatomy assured me earnestly that Mary was and must be always right. With a pretty complacency, she continued:

"Her duty is to teach. Don't forget that."

I laid my pen down and sighed.

"Am I likely to . . .?"

"Very likely. Your dear, silly, old head is simply stuffed full of preposterous fancies, half girls and half nymphs. What you would do without me to see whole governesses for you, goodness only knows. Why, you are quite capable of thinking her a goddess, and behaving accordingly."

I heard but one word — "goddess."

"Mary!" I cried joyously. "You're wonderful. I quite agree." And if she went away smiling with gratification, it would have taken a harder-hearted man than I to dispel her delusion.

I saw Mary's point — secretly I even sympathised with it — that is the drawback to possessing a sympathetic imagination. My position was one of peculiar loneliness. I was the only male on the premises, if you except Billy the cat and Buster the dog, both of whom, being hopelessly enamoured of Diana, strove unwearyingly to commit the very sin against which I had been so solemnly warned.

Of one thing I am certain — Diana endeared herself to the entire household. Mary approved of her, and I — well, I made no secret of my feelings. As for Pam, she not only loved Diana — she had done that from the first — but she adored her. Heroine-worship — with the surrendering of critical judgment which it entails — has no terrors for Pam. Nor can I blame her for being a chip of the old block.

I used to watch them sometimes, rather wistfully, but with a very warm admiration for all that. To see Diana and Pam together — rolling over and over in the purple heather, or playing hide-and-seek in the miniature forests of bracken — to hear their happy laughter — to watch them wandering hand in hand under the trees, or up the hill — Pam, eager, bubbling with questions, brimming with the absorbing importance of the moment — Diana, listening, answering, explaining, as eager as her little pupil, as happy, as free from self-consciousness — to see and hear all this was to witness and give ear to something very charming indeed.

To the school-room I did not penetrate, but reports therefrom — whispered through the partially opened door by the partially opened lips of Mary — assured me that both were "doing as well as could be expected." I retired on tiptoe, as from a sick-room, slightly bewildered, and almost under the joyous illusion conjured up by the familiar phrase.

I have spoken of Diana's joy in physical exercise. I should like to recount many instances — I will, however, give but three.

Mention has already been made of Diana's walking powers. "My free day" — as she termed her occasional afternoon of emancipation from her duties — was invariably spent in flinging the long leagues behind her, in breasting hills, in dipping into valleys, in ford-

ing streams, in close companionship with woods, and glens, and wind-blown moors, in the haunting of silent and solitary places, in communion with the sunset and the dusk. I love to think of her surrounded by all those beneficent influences. She was their child, their darling, as much a part of them as was the light upon the loch or the wind upon the hill.

The second instance is neither so peaceful nor so impersonal. It certainly was no scheme of mine; nor, I swear, was it any plan of Diana's. Pam was entirely to blame — that is, if blame can be attached, which I, for one, deny.

Finding out that Mary had requisitioned me to cut down a pine on the other side of the loch, in order to replenish our supply of firewood, Pam at once dragged Diana by the hand to my workshop, where I was engaged in sharpening an axe. With slight incoherence, but extreme volubility, my daughter pointed out that Diana was about to enjoy a "free day" — that she had expressed a wish to climb the hill that towers beyond the water to the south, and that, as "Daddy" was bound in the same direction, he could not do better than take "dear Diana" with him in the boat.

And Diana stood there, in the doorway, with sunbeams in her hair. I looked at both my visitors with a sort of inward amazement. Pam, all at once, seemed tremendously near me. Her personality impressed itself upon mine with looks, with words, with gestures, with all the intensity, all the loving familiarity of her ardent nature. Diana, on the contrary, seemed tremendously distant, as impersonal as the dawn; a beautiful illusion like a slumbering lake that reflects not its own deeps, but the woods upon its shores.

It was not till I actually found myself in the same boat with Diana that I fully realised that, for the moment, I, too, had become part of a free day, only a

small part, a paltry half-hour, it is true, but an indispensable part, for Diana merely adorned the sternsheets; while I tugged at the oars.

If anyone imagines that to row our capacious tub of a boat in the teeth of a strong westerly wind is an easy job, all I say is "Come and try it." True, only half a mile had to be covered, but every foot of that distance was like wrestling with a professional athlete.

I laboured, I tugged, I strained — more; I puffed and perspired. Diana looked on, provokingly cool, swaying lightly to the rolling and plunging of the boat, apparently unruffled by the gusts. Past question, she was enjoying herself. I was delighted, but I should have been considerably more pleased if I could have shared her enjoyment.

Since we had left the northern shore no word had passed, save "Breezy?" from me, and "Yes" from Diana. I confess I felt like old Charon ferrying a beautiful but discouragingly reticent soul across the Styx.

All at once Diana seemed to realise my existence — perhaps owing to the fact that I had severely splashed her. She looked at me with attention, and — was it a twinkle I saw in her eyes?

"Shall I take an oar?" she suggested.

"No necessity," I shouted. "We're getting on splendidly."

But, even as I spoke, a shark appeared to dig its teeth into the blade of my right oar, worry it for a moment, and then release it so unexpectedly that something prodded me violently in the chest.

"Take care!" cried Diana. "You nearly caught a crab."

I had neither breath nor time to contradict. The gale swooped down upon us in a howl of derision, buffeted us, tore the water to shreds, then fled into the

murky east. I laboured mightily — but, contrary to preconceived plans, and in spite of my superhuman exertions, we were heading straight for Balquhidder.

Then — Diana took charge. At one moment she was in the stern-sheets, and at the next she was occupying the seat in front of me and had taken possession of the stroke oar.

I looked at her back with anxiety — a girl! My experience of girls . . . but at the first dip of her oar my misgivings gave place to admiration, and — shall I confess it? — to envy.

"Where the devil has she learned to row like this?" I asked myself as, setting my teeth, and gluing my eyes to her back, I endeavoured to imitate her long, easy, powerful, Varsity boat-race style. In vain!

And now a dreadful thing — an ignominious thing. I, all at once, became conscious of the fact that I was being pulled round! — and yet, mind you, I was pulling a fine stroke — a tremendous stroke, but, somehow, it wasn't quite the equal of Diana's. No doubt the current . . .

At that, I redoubled exertions. I rose, panting, from the thwarts at every stroke. It became a race, a trial of strength and of endurance — on my part, at all events. We lashed along — shipped a lot of water, I remember. The crests of impatient waves curled above the gunwale. The wind increased. The sky blackened. But I didn't care. I was past caring. Something inside me — my outraged manhood, most likely — muttered through clenched teeth: "Stick it out! Only a girl! Don't be beaten! Pull, you landlubber — pull — pull — pull!"

I pass over the next ten minutes — to my thinking we sailed the valley of the shadow. The sound of the bows grating on the shingle was welcome to my ears as a reprieve to a condemned man. Diana sprang

ashore. She turned her shining face, all wet with spray, in my direction. She cried:

"Wasn't it glorious!"

"Glorious! Merciful Heavens!" thought I, "if this be glory, anyone can have my share of it for the asking."

My heart was hammering — my breath was gone — my body was one big protest against cruelty to a middle-aged man — and I had a distinct sensation of buzzing in the ears — but — I smiled. That smile should be recorded in imperishable letters on my tombstone.

Now that the crossing was accomplished, I realised that we must part. The little pine-wood whither I was bound lay farther to the west, whereas the path to the mountain — Diana's objective — trailed straight to the south. At any other time I believe I should have invited her to accompany me, but, after the experience of the past half-hour, I did not feel equal to the exertion. A girl like that — why, she was capable of wresting my axe from me and cutting down my tree!

I looked after her, as she speeded ever onwards and upwards, and I asked myself what profit, or knowledge, or advancement had I gained that afternoon. I thought of all Diana had said. It could easily have been written on a postage-stamp. Evidently a fraction of a free day was insufficient — as a sample it was disappointing. All the time, even while endeavouring to avoid assaulting her back with the handle of my oar, I had been conscious of her aloofness. It was as though she breathed a different atmosphere — she might have been the maid in the moon.

Up and up she sped. Never once did she look back. My mythological simile held good. The soul, transported across the dark river, was mounting to Paradise. So lightly did she flit, her feet might have been wings. But she bestowed no kindly, backward-glancing thought

on old Charon, standing there with wet feet — poor old Charon, a very decent chap, and a first-class boatman — in his way!

The third instance is a secret, and its only possible tone is a whisper. Intent upon mushrooms, I had stolen out of doors one morning, hard upon the summer sunrise. My basket full, I began slowly to retrace my steps towards the house. My way led me along the margin of the loch. On my immediate right, the woods sloped steeply upwards — on my left, the unruffled water, seen in entrancing peeps through the silver of the birches, reflected the pale, pellucid blue of the sky.

Scarce a ripple of lazy surf fretted the network of roots, the miniature bays of red-gold sand, and the promontories of fantastic rock.

A bird broke into song. I stopped to listen. It ceased. I remained motionless.

I find it impossible to do justice to this solemn hour of dawn — the exquisite freshness, the dewy silence, the profound peace, the beauty too clear for night, too faint for day — the whole scene interpenetrated by dreamland mystery — a spell — a waiting — for not a breath sighed, not a leaf trembled.

All at once I started. My semi-bewitched senses leapt to attention. I realised suddenly that I was not alone. Strange! At that very moment I was thinking: "What a propitious hour, and what a perfect place for some sweet, pagan deity." And then . . . this! The coincidence was more than remarkable. I felt myself trembling with excitement. Had it come at last, the power to see — after all my dreams — after all the years?

I know not what I should have done had my longings materialised. Worshipped, perhaps — stared in stupid, human amazement, more likely — shared the fate of Actæon, most probably. Fancies, hallucinations,

dreams! Yet it was base ingratitude to sigh — for, if the fates withheld the presence of a goddess, they accorded me a glimpse of . . . Diana — the reader has already guessed it! Diana bathing, Diana, a picture framed in leaves: Diana standing erect upon a pinnacle of rock that overhung the still water: Diana dressed in a single clinging garment that concealed nothing of the noble symmetry of her form; gleaming faintly in the dawn; ivory-white against the morning mists and the pale panorama of the mountains.

I was about to move away when — the sun rose.

To my mind, it would be no exaggeration to say that he rose entirely for Diana. It is of course possible that he lighted the rest of the scenery, but, if he did, I failed to notice it.

Unable now to avert my eyes, I stood among the forest undergrowth and literally held my breath.

Diana raised her white arms, shot them perpendicularly aloft, palms outwards, in the attitude of worship. For a long moment she stood thus. Not a doubt but that she exulted in the light, revelled in the beauty, gave thanks for the advent of yet another day.

Then, bringing her hands together and bending her body, she dived from the rock. There was scarcely a splash. She cleft the surface like a silver spear.

I waited and watched.

It seemed a long, long time before she reappeared, far out, a mere speck upon the world of waters, swimming strongly towards the sun.

CHAPTER VII

"JACK!" cried the voice of Mary.

I looked up, and there was the lady in question beckoning to me from the top of the staircase.

Promptly I obeyed the summons.

There was something about this apparently trivial incident curiously illustrative of our mental relationship. Metaphorically, Mary is always beckoning me up to her own heights, her plateau of pure reason, whilst I, obedient and aspiring, am forever climbing steadily, but without advancing one inch nearer the goal.

Gaining her side, I was informed that, as I was going fishing on the following day in the lochan at the head of the Kirkton glen, and as neither she nor Pam could accompany me on account of the distance, she had made up her mind to lend me Diana for the day.

Mary often amazes me. Her choice of words! *Lend*, mark you, as though our incomparable Diana were half-a-crown, or an old umbrella!

"It will prevent your being lonely," said Mary, and had she said, "It will keep off influenza," she could not have said it with greater kindliness.

"You're sure you'd like it?" she added.

"There's a boat up there," I said; then, with greater cheerfulness, "but it's nearly square — no opportunity for Grace Darling stunts — so that's all right. You can lend her your rod, and I'll teach her to fish . . . Well, what is it?"

Mary had laughed softly.

"I rather think it will be she who'll do the teach-

ing, dear. She told me last night that her biggest salmon . . . "

But here I reminded Mary — I fear rather testily — that no dinner likes to be kept waiting.

I looked at Diana as we began the meal. She was seated within one yard of me, and was sipping soup with delicacy, almost with abstraction. Outwardly she was the same, but inwardly I was conscious of a difference. Without ceasing for a moment to be a girl, she had become a loan. My spirits rose. When informed of the transaction, she remained as unmoved as though I had offered to pass her the salt. "No matter," thought I, "who can tell what a day may bring forth — one whole long summer's day."

When the cock that crows in the morn roused me from peaceful slumber, I forgave him. Usually I curse his progeny to the seventh generation, but upon this occasion I merely thanked him. My watch told me it was five o'clock. My bedroom commands the coming day. Eagerly I looked out of the window. The small company of larch-firs that confronts the great fire in the east stood motionless and unnaturally dark against the growing light. No hectic flush aroused evil prognostications. The face of the young day was fresh and clear as that of a child. Above the sombre horizon there was a faint suspicion of rose. It was the colour of joy. The blue above was the emblem of hope. A fine day. My heart sang. The world was fair, and Diana was to be on loan for twelve mortal hours. What wonder that — as I turned in bed and resigned myself again to sleep — I wrapped myself in warm anticipations as in an eiderdown.

"Remember you've promised," said Mary, after breakfast.

That was so like her. In all probability not a word on the subject has been spoken, and yet she assures you,

solemnly and with conviction, that you have bound yourself down by promises to some line of conduct that has no existence save in her wholly unaccountable imagination. Only a very truthful person can afford to be so flagrantly untruthful.

In some dismay I asked her what I was supposed to have promised.

"No goddesses or nymphs," she explained, kissing my left ear, after which she remarked we were going to have a fine day. Dear heart, she spoke cheerfully, but I saw that to speed us on our joyous errand, to hold, as it were, to our lips the goblet of the high hills, from which an untoward fate had forbidden her to sip, was no easy task.

She and Pam accompanied us up the grassy slope that shelters our house from the north. They halted where the grass stopped and the bracken began. I can see them now — two dear figures, dark in the beating sunlight, waving, waving, growing ever smaller as we receded — scarce distinguishable in the wide radiance from rocks and trees — but for all that filling my whole world with love.

Diana and I marched along side by side. In a short time we were fairly afloat on the tempestuous ocean of the hills. Together we scrambled up rocks, waded through heather, plunged into bracken, traversed gullies, and clung to sheep-tracks. The sun shone — the breeze sighed, or was still — a wild sweetness was in the air — the clear voices of little burns sang, now soft, now loud — God's earth was good, and Diana and I, apparently, had it all to ourselves.

Silence is gold, speech is silver. I began by choosing the rarer metal. It was no occasion to be niggardly. Moreover, to our grosser ears many of the most beneficent influences in nature are silent. The sun is silent — the skies are silent — the hills are very silent. And,

no doubt, their wide and spacious silence cloaks august, significant, and inaudible communications that link them each to each in a vast and universal brotherhood, from which man alone is excluded, unless he, too, can learn to be silent.

Realising that it would be impossible to praise silence to my companion unless I broke it, I did so without compunction.

She listened politely, but showed every sign of having entered into a loyal and lasting *entente cordiale* with inarticulate nature.

I confess to a slight feeling of disappointment — I had no wish to be taken too literally. Besides, what is extremely praiseworthy in a hill is scarcely permissible in a girl. By rights, she should have had so much to say — gunroom tales — a rower of boats — a slayer of salmon — and, incidentally, I fell to wondering what the weight of her biggest fish had really been.

Then a thought, that was scarcely so pleasant, struck me — was the fault mine? Did she judge me unworthy — too old in years, or too young in experience — or what? There must be some subject — some "open sesame."

I was badgering my brains when, far off, I caught sight of a bull, one of those shaggy Highland fellows, like Caledonia, all "stern and wild," which seem to have been created on purpose to match the scenery. I at once pointed him out to my companion.

I knew she loved animals, so was not surprised when my conversational effort was rewarded by a gleam of interest. Following up my advantage, I discoursed on bulls. Now, it takes either a farmer who wants to sell, or a man who has nearly been gored, to talk feelingly about bulls. I came within the latter category.

Diana listened to the account of my misadventure,

and then volunteered the information that she had met with a similar experience.

"He galloped after me across a large field," she concluded.

"Jupiter!" I ejaculated.

Her eyebrows arched.

"He mistook you for Europa," I explained with a glow.

She searched my face quickly. Heaven knows what she expected to find in it — the light of insanity, perhaps. In her transparently candid eyes I certainly read something that might have been the birth of alarm. This distressing symptom was followed by a swift withdrawal behind the defences of maidenly reserve. After which, we walked on in silence — the silence I had praised! — for an uncomfortable five minutes.

I remember looking with jaundiced eyes at the scenery. I remember wondering — with new-born humility — if Mary could possibly be right after all, in her smiling and compassionate assertion that I did not understand girls.

Some old fraud of a sage has it that, if a man but make one woman his lifelong study, he becomes fully qualified to pass an examination in the entire sex. Pshaw! the fellow lied in his teeth. Had he married Mary, and gone fishing with Diana, he would soon have discovered his mistake.

I look back now on the ten minutes that followed this fit of depression, with self-congratulation, for in that short space of time I proved Mary wrong, and vindicated my character as a student of feminine psychology.

Tackling the subject seriously, I saw how unreasonable I was to be dejected by Diana's temporary unsociability. Had I not delighted in her because she harmonised with the spirit of nature?

Girls are compact of many moods, and no doubt Diana possessed her gay moods too — my memories of her with Pam confirmed me in this opinion. Well, the gaiety would return all in good time, and for the present, let me accept gratefully such silent companionship as she deigned to bestow.

And, another thing, it came to me that her reserve might have a deeper source than a merely passing mood. She had but newly come among us. How could I tell what feelings of strangeness, of loneliness, and perhaps even of homesickness tugged at her young heart?

And yet another thing, perhaps she did not feel altogether comfortable about me. My escort had been foisted upon her in a somewhat arbitrary manner. It was possible she might have declined it had she acted entirely of her own free will. Also, I had taken no pains to hide my idiosyncrasies.

Actuated by these considerations, I found myself gazing at her, much as a man might gaze at an extremely interesting but as yet unsolved acrostic.

She was striding through the sunlit bracken. The great green fronds clustered about her, strove to stay her, but her young vigorous limbs drove through them, even as the forefoot of a gallant vessel cleaves the sea. Beautiful little barque — but not a sign of the crew.

"Diana," I said softly; then with sudden anxiety: "You don't mind an old buffer like me calling you Diana, do you?"

She half turned round. We were walking in single file; she before, I behind. Our eyes met. Watching intently, I was immensely relieved to see the corners of her mouth curve into a smile. A dimple came into being. Her negative was graciousness itself.

I waited, hoping rather wistfully that she might find it in her heart to contradict the "old buffer," but, as

she said no more, I continued: "Would you mind sitting down — it's discouraging to talk to your back."

She at once seated herself upon a boulder that edged the narrow path.

"Diana," I went on, "I see you don't know how to take me."

She gave a slight start. I hurried on:

"You mustn't mind my allusion to 'Europa'; you'll find I've got a mythological kink, but it's quite harmless. A man I once met said he knew things that can't be known. He told me that I had been a minor Greek poet in my last incarnation. As a matter of fact, I remember nothing about it, but of course everything is possible, and, anyway, it accounts quite nicely for the very warm feeling I undoubtedly have for the gods, and more especially for the goddesses, of antiquity."

This all came out with a rush — and, when I had got it successfully off my chest, I paused, rather anxious. Had it produced the right effect? It was more than doubtful. There was a look of bewilderment in the blue eyes fixed so steadily on mine — a look that certainly called for further enlightenment. I continued:

"All this" — here I waved my arm affectionately to the hills — "means a lot to me. I feel at home here. I feel that if I'm a bit of old Greek life reborn, this is a bit of old Greek scenery expatriated. Look at that hill. Isn't it just the sort of place for Pan? See that little pool! Wouldn't it make a topping hip-bath for a nymph?"

My fair auditor gave the place indicated her consideration, and then turned her eyes on me. I wish I could put into words all that I saw in those eyes. I had succeeded beyond my dreams. I had awakened something — someone. Was it the nymph?

"But I can't see them," I said, bending forward, sure now of sympathetic comprehension. "To me —

all that — it's lonely, depopulated — that's it, depopulated. And then — you came. I'm old enough to be your father, so I can tell you what I feel. It's nothing personal, except a delight in your youth, and looks, and — and joy of life. I'd give just anything for Pam to grow up like you. In fact, I'd love to think of you as my daughter — my eldest daughter. *Now* do you understand?"

"Yes," she breathed quickly, and her sudden smile would have made a "sunshine in a shady place."

CHAPTER VIII

We reached a niche perched high like an eagle's eyrie. It had a rock to the east, another to the west, yet another to the north, but towards the south you could have planed off into space, for the ground fell sheer a thousand feet, and it seemed as if one could drop a stone into the water far below.

The wind at this height was inclined to treat us with levity, but the sun welcomed us with more than compensating warmth.

The view was particularly fine. Loch Voil, as before mentioned, lay immediately below us. Beyond its rippled silver, the hills shouldered each other into the dreamy distance, back above back, like a vast company of sleeping mammoths awaiting the night. Gazing nearly perpendicularly downwards, we could see the road that connected Ledecriech to Balquhidder, a grey ribbon coiled round the margin of the loch, now visible, now lost among trees. Few people use it, save my old friends the postman and the roadmender, or, at times, some solemn, bearded farmer lurching along in his gig.

Diana and I seated ourselves side by side. I was thankful for the rest, but she was enviably untroubled by labouring lungs. It was while we were perched up there, isolated from the world like occupants of a captive balloon, that she told me something of her past life.

She had done a great deal, but not more than thousands of other girls of her age who had lived through that period of splendid voluntary service — the Great War. Still, that she drove an ambulance-car, both at home and later in France, and that she had been teacher

both of gymnastics and dancing, are facts that went far towards accounting for her radiant physical fitness. Her father was dead, her mother still alive, in some English town, I forget which. She had neither brothers nor sisters.

Some question on my part, as to when she had first visited Scotland, led her to speak of the Hebrides, and of an uncle, her mother's brother, who lived there. He had been a captain in the merchant service, and, when he left the sea for good, had built himself a cottage upon the shores of one of those northern islands, within sight and sound of the fickle element he loved.

Diana had stayed with this relative on several occasions — Uncle Joe, she called him, and from her description I could picture him, a hale old fellow, kindly and bluff, a bit of a martinet in his sea way, living the life of a hermit, but always delighted to welcome his niece.

It was during one of her visits to this old uncle that Diana had, for the first time, become aware of (what I can only call) her dual personality — aware of it, I mean, as a mental condition that had to be reckoned with. To me, at all events, she made no attempt to explain it. When she touched upon the subject, she was immensely serious, indeed perturbed. I inferred, not a little to my amazement, that, with the exception of her uncle, I was the only person admitted into the secret. Even now I am at a loss to explain why she confided in me. It seems incomprehensible. I was practically a stranger — an old fellow, more than double her years, and her employer — three conditions that one might reasonably imagine would have proved an insuperable barrier to the intimacy that alone made confidence possible. That I liked and admired her, and, indeed, had told her so, did not seem to me sufficient excuse; for it was not only the salient events of her life

that she narrated, but details of a usually private nature — the sort of embarrassing experiences that one is generally careful to keep to oneself.

There must, of course, have been some sufficient reason. Perhaps my sympathy created a bond between us, was more visible and more persuasive than I imagined; or, perhaps, her reticence, once overcome, simply ceased to exist; or — and this reason is, I think, the most probable — perhaps in touching upon her life-history Diana was carried away, carried further than she intended, and the disconcerting confession just slipped out before she was aware of it.

Be that as it may, I found much that was both appealing and irresistible in the situation. A compliment more subtle, or more delicate, could not have been offered me. Not only did I feel flattered, but touched. There was something childlike in Diana's trustfulness. Not for a moment did she appear apprehensive of disbelief; neither did she seem to fear that I might impute all that she told me to a disordered imagination. At times she struck me less as narrating than as thinking aloud; puzzling almost painfully over the why and the wherefore. Indeed the complexity of her emotions was in curious contradistinction to the simplicity of her manner. Pathetically she resembled a person groping in the dark, seeking for something reassuringly tangible, something reassuringly comprehensible, amid a world of unfamiliar shadows. And, all the time she was speaking, I received the distinct impression that everything that was most normal in the girl's mind — and there was much that was extremely sensible and even practical in Diana — shrank from the enforced necessity of visualising the existence of a self for whom she could not account.

In me, sitting motionless by her side, listening with a strained attention — for now and again her voice

sank so low as to be barely audible — the strangeness of the narrative aroused highly contradictory feelings. Thinking it over later, I realised that the charm of my young companion had held first place, and not so much her beauty as the residing spirit in her, a spirit inexpressibly sweet and delicate and unspotted by contact with the world.

But to this feeling, that was all pleasure, was insensibly added another that was far from being as delectable, namely, doubt. The doubt did not reflect for one moment upon the manifest and limpid sincerity of Diana, but was concerned exclusively with the possibility of her self-deception. Was she, I asked myself, the subject of hallucinations? Nothing could have contradicted such an assumption more forcibly than did her appearance. No one could have differed more essentially from the type of young woman who usually poses as psychic than did the radiant girl at my side. Our environment too — the strong illumination of noon, steeping all things in a flood of exceptional clarity — seemed to anchor us reassuringly to the facts of material existence.

It was my first experience of dual personality, and I was disposed to treat it with reserve. Up to that moment the "Jekyll and Hyde" theory had seemed to me to lend itself more to sensational fiction than to sober fact. I knew nothing about psychical phenomena. Moreover, I had always avoided the subject as being too often the hunting-ground of charlatanism to commend itself to any self-respecting searcher after truth. Personally, also, I had always been conscious of a curious and instinctive distaste of all phenomena that, so far as I was concerned, eluded the light of reason.

There indubitably was in Diana's murmured and fragmentary recital a very considerable element of the uncanny. The impression left by her psychic experi-

ences upon her young and plastic mind was necessarily vague — dreamlike, I might term it, for like some mysterious vision of the night they had been summoned up by the dim promptings of her subconscious self — the self that dwells in every one of us, the self that sleeps when we are awake, and wakes when we are asleep. That, at all events, is how I tried to explain the matter to myself.

Piecing together all that she told me, I gathered that even in childhood there had been evidences of this strange *alter ego*, a being responsible to unaccountable influences, sensitively alive to the emotional, primitive in its influences, and acted upon at times, to a quite disconcerting extent, by certain phases of wild and untrammelled nature.

These moods — transformation is perhaps the more accurate word — had come and gone swiftly. No doubt her surrender to this mysterious stranger bewildered, and even alarmed her. I venture to think she was ashamed of it. That I surmised to be the reason she had locked it up within her breast. The amazing thing is — I cannot repeat this too often — that she told me about it at all.

Encouraged by my genuine sympathy, Diana recounted one episode — an episode of weird and absorbing interest. It had taken place at her uncle's cottage in the Hebrides when she was fifteen years of age. The scene she conjured up grew in vividness as each simple sentence painted the picture.

Night and a lonely cottage — "the loneliest in the whole world" she phrased it with the impulsive exaggeration of youth — the sea raving on miles of rock, its multitudinous voices blending into one continuous, deep, and solemn sound that oppressed the senses; a little glen, near by, climbing upwards, fringed with starved and pitiably stunted trees; and hills upon which

nothing would ever grow — all this steeped, saturated and etherealized by the unearthly witchery of the moon.

Then followed a confession of the growing unrest.

"I couldn't breathe," she murmured — "I wanted air — freedom. Uncle Joe was asleep in his big chair. He always fell asleep after supper. What could I do?"

She made a little gesture, hands spread abroad, her fine eyebrows slightly arched above the clear wistfulness of her eyes. It seemed as if the kindly human companionship, that might in her hour of need have safeguarded her from things unseen, had been treacherously withdrawn, as if unconsciousness had been cast over the old man by invisible hands like a net, like a spell. It was characteristic of her that even in her agitation she did not even think of disturbing him.

"Were you frightened?" I asked as she paused.

She considered, then admitted reluctantly that one part of her had been frightened, because it felt itself drifting, weakening, and didn't know how far the other part would go. She had always considered reticence and self-control necessary to self-respect and to feel these qualities oozing out of her alarmed and distressed her more than she could describe.

This was rather vague, rather mysterious. I entreated her to be more explicit.

"How *can* I tell you?" she cried with just a touch of reproach. "Everything changed — all at once the unreal became real — vital, and the real became unreal."

"Ah!" I grunted, considerably mystified.

"I lost my hold on it," she insisted. "The old me — the me that is talking to you now — hung back, tried to resist, was frightened; but the new me got the upper hand, got excited, wanted to dance. Something was calling it into the moonlight."

"Something . . . ?" I questioned, still at a loss.

"Something here . . . " She laid a hand on her young breast; paused; then, with a manifest desire for scrupulous accuracy, added: "And out there too."

I nodded. There seemed to be nothing else left for me to do. No use repeating that I didn't understand her. As I said before, psychic matters are beyond me. I remember hoping that in the interests of truth she would translate my nod into a sign of sympathy rather than of comprehension. But, as a matter of fact, I don't think she noticed it at all. There had fallen upon her an abstraction. She had lowered her glance till the dark, silky fringe of her eyelashes all but rested upon her soft cheeks. She sat there very still. Her whole sentient being was, I felt convinced, not upon our ledge at all, but back across the gulf of intervening years in the lonely cottage by the sea. I waited with suppressed impatience.

All at once she raised her head and informed me that the crucial point came when she had caught sight of her face in the mirror. From her tone I realised that she had received a shock — her double, so to speak, staring full at her — the wide, shining eyes, with something elfin and strange dancing in the depths of their pupils — the lips parted with excitement — the pallor — the listening attitude — the frozen immobility of pose. For a moment she had failed to grasp the fact that it was herself. She thought it some stranger — some wraith. It undoubtedly upset the soberly reasoning part of her. I don't wonder. It would have upset anybody. It brought home to that part trenchantly — indeed poignantly — the awe-inspiring nature of the change that was taking place. The glass could not lie; and yet the reflection was unfamiliar! It was herself, and yet not herself. She had recoiled, speechless.

"And then?" I prompted, after a short and agitated pause.

And then, it appeared, she had been drawn irresistibly into the moonlight.

"Without waiting to dress?" I interrupted in high amazement — for she had previously mentioned that she had been on the point of getting into bed.

"Yes," she murmured, turning grave, innocent eyes of wonder upon me. I subsided. It seemed to me almost incredible that before going out she had not given her state of undress so much as a thought. For that the utter loneliness of the locality may have been partly responsible. But no — I really believe it to be in her peculiar psychic condition that the true reason must be sought. She wasn't herself. Not a doubt of it. And when my amazement had evaporated, I found something appealingly childlike in her absolute disregard of conventionalities. It chimed with the scene, the metamorphosis, and the summons. A return to Nature, and no doubt Nature welcomed her and was delighted so to do.

CHAPTER IX

"The hills were all awake," she confided to me just under her breath. And I, listening, marvelling, could almost see the little white-robed figure lured on and on into the grim fastnesses of those iron hills, those hills upon which nothing would ever grow.

Beyond this she could recall little, save that she had danced in the moonlight, and that her uncle had discovered her in the early morning far up the mountain, asleep in a crevice.

The final picture — a mere nebulous impression, for though her gratitude was warm, her memory gazed at it as through a glass darkly — comes back to me now as something beautiful and touching: the sturdy old mariner, his heart no doubt full of present thankfulness not untinged with anxiety for the future — trudging homewards under the rising sun, clasping to his breast his little errant niece, even as a good shepherd might carry a missing lamb.

I listened to all this in silence. This, then, was the reason of the purely instinctive feeling that had prompted me to call Diana "half girl, half nymph." It was stranger than any fiction — this imperative, this literal "call of the wild." Even with her confession still sounding in my ears, I found it most difficult to connect her with that other self — the self that had danced in the moonlight clad only in her night attire.

So composed did she seem, sitting there sedately by my side — she breathed such perfect normality, her expression pensive, with something of the old delicate, maidenly aloofness — her very clothes, from the neat

little hat to the eminently suitable and businesslike brogues, suggesting the practical, suggesting shops — that I marvelled. Had I been listening to a fairy-tale? I felt like rubbing my eyes. Was this, or was this not, Pam's governess?

Then I fell to wondering what the world would say. The man in the street would undoubtedly scoff — unless, indeed, he were humane enough to pity. The woman in the street — the typical, strong, but far from silent sample of feminine sanity — Mary, for instance . . . ? Ah, I knew but too well what Mary's attitude would be — the kindliness, the mothering element, the sage advice, the gift at bedtime of a bottle of Carter's Little Liver Pills!

"After all," I meditated, "what does it matter if Diana did lose control? She was only a child. It was no worse than sleep-walking. No doubt her one escapade — an isolated incident . . . "

"It has happened several times since," murmured Diana.

I started. It was as though she felt and contradicted my inmost thoughts. "Several times!" The admission made it much more serious. It came over me with something of a shock that it might occur again — at any moment. To me the most amazing thing was, and still is, her childlike ignorance, her utter disregard of any danger that could befall a girl, young, beautiful, and given to wandering out of doors at night very insufficiently clad. I was wrong. It *was* more perilous than somnambulism. The danger lay not only in whom she encountered, but in her own mood. "I felt I would do anything — anything," she had said. The large licence of that admission opened doors for apprehension.

Of course, much was guesswork on my part — it could not well be otherwise — but from the few phrases she let fall, phrases unconsciously illuminating, I

seemed to see this other self as one robbed of defences, curiously plastic, swayed by impulse, looking neither forward nor backward, to whom the living present with its emotions and desires would prove far more overwhelmingly important than dead yesterday, or unborn to-morrow. Of course, I might be wrong — I hoped to God I was.

Beyond asking her what her uncle thought about it, I said nothing to frighten her; besides, the subject was too delicate to be discussed — by me, at all events — much too delicate. Even her uncle, in the growls of an old sea-dog, had confined himself to pointing out the obvious and material dangers — death from cold and exposure, the possibility of being lost in the sea-mist, or being killed by falling from rocks.

It came over me to feel sorry for that bluff and ancient mariner. This niece of his must have proved a sad responsibility. I can well imagine his thanking the Deity from the bottom of his heart when he saw the last of her, waving a little handkerchief, no doubt, from the deck of a south-bound steamer. Yes, and I can imagine too, his return to the cottage, the emptiness of it, the loneliness, the sense of loss, and how often the moon, rising, must have looked in vain for the little white-robed figure dancing to the awakened hills.

I felt all this very much, for on me had fallen the mantle of the old seaman's responsibility. With all her independence, her composure, her air of youthful self-sufficiency, this girl was, as it were, a trust; a something delicate and fine and beautiful and pure as unsullied snow; something that awakened in me every protective and chivalrous emotion; a something to guard, not only from danger without, but (infinitely more perilous, because infinitely more subtle) from danger within.

I like to think now that I did not hesitate, no, not

for a moment, but silently accepted this trust in the spirit in which fate had offered it, and that Diana was wholly unconscious of my resolve is a fact that rendered it neither less solemn, nor less binding.

And then — I made a discovery.

CHAPTER X

DIANA, still immersed in dreams, sat with her hands folded in her lap. Upon one of her fingers glittered a ring. The device was curious — a golden arrow transfixing two diamond hearts. Lazily, out of idle curiosity, never dreaming how pregnant the question was to prove, I commented on it.

"Do you like it?" she asked. The sudden change in her manner was remarkable. In a moment she had become eager, all animation, all smiles, very wide-awake, very natural. It seemed as though this ring were a talisman, a powerful afreet, who had only to be evoked in order to banish all memory of the irresponsible.

She extended her hand. Her eyes rested on the ring with a light, warm as an embrace.

"It's my engagement ring," she said softly.

Now, so far was I from connecting her with even the preliminaries of matrimony, that I stupidly repeated her words as if they had no meaning for me.

"Yes," she said — and smiled — "engaged to be married."

She was engaged to be married! *Married!* In vulgar phrase, you could have knocked me down with a feather. If you had told me that Diana, her immortal prototype, the huntress-goddess, the symbol of chaste virginity, had accepted an engagement to recant her vows in public, dressed entirely in white satin and orange blossoms, I could not have been more astounded. If I had been Jupiter himself, I could not have experienced a displeasure more Olympic.

There was another feeling, too, a human feeling, a

selfish feeling, one of acute disappointment. If she married, she would inevitably leave us, and never, never, never should we find another Diana!

"Is — is it to be soon?" I faltered, endeavouring to mask the anxiety I felt.

I was informed that it would be as soon as Gerald was able to afford it.

"Ah," I murmured with a sudden glimmer of hope; "in two or three years?"

But she blighted that hope at once. It turned out that Gerald was expecting a rise. Her prejudiced lips termed him indispensable. Amazement — emanating from the same source — was expressed that so valuable a business asset as Gerald's brain had gone, not only unrewarded, but even unrecognised for so long. If there be any truth in the supposition, the ears of Master Gerald should have burned.

Outwardly, I was basking in sunshine, revelling in scenery, enjoying to the full the noon of a perfect day in the company of an emancipated divinity — but, inwardly, I was gloomily visualising an imminent wedding, a small house at Surbiton, a diminutive back-garden, and the close proximity of a railway — termed "a convenience," save the mark! — which latter would be privileged to convey the sacred person of the indispensable Gerald to and from the City every day.

Surbiton! Back-garden! The City! Diana had thought it all out. She even looked forward to it.

I was asked if I would like to see his photograph.

In her voice and manner I divined something more than the sweet graciousness of one bestowing a favour. It is not easy to express, but if I call it a hope, almost a confident expectation, that I, her newly adopted father, would sympathise and understand, I shall not be far wrong.

A locket was presented to me. I opened it.

"Diana, my dear," I cried paternally and cordially, "I like him. I like him very much indeed."

Diana beamed with pleasure.

The locket lay open on my knee, and we both, with heads close together, gazed down at the fortunate Gerald.

"I'm glad you like him," she said.

"Yes," I conceded, "I like him. Not a bit complex. He's modern, without being too modern. I like clean-shaven faces a lot better than Charlie Chaplin moustaches. Honest eyes, sensible, steady, looks straight at you. A strong face, determined jaw, knows his own mind, eh?"

Diana smiled.

"Sort of chap who'll take command; very kindly, of course. But . . . " I looked thoughtfully at the sweet face so close to mine, "will you like to be influenced — that is, so much?"

But, apparently, that was exactly what she did want. Not only that, but she gave me to understand that his strength of character and his sterling common-sense were an immense consolation to her. He was tremendously normal, she assured me with great earnestness, and, odd as it may appear, she clung to that fact with confidence, with hope, with unrelaxing tenacity, and also with pride. It became increasingly evident — to use a nautical simile — that Diana was to supply the grace, the poetry, and the romance of this vessel-in-the-making, whereas Gerald was to provide the ballast, the log, and, most certainly, the steering-gear.

Nothing was said on the subject, but, noting her attitude towards this prospective marriage, and listening to her happy plans for the future, I came to the conclusion that Diana believed that from the moment she became Gerald's wife all the restlessness from which she periodically suffered, and the longings that drew

her irresistibly towards wild nature, would just fade away, melt, dissolve like morning mists before the great triumphant sun of love. It was a beautiful belief. It relieved me considerably. It possessed all the steadfast assurance of faith, above logic, superior to scepticism, a bright star to steer by, indestructible as a creed, unshakable as the assurance of life everlasting.

And, across the gulf of the many years, I looked back at these two young things, Diana and Gerald, following in the track that Mary and I had trod, and from the bottom of my heart I wished them our luck and our happiness. Yes, I sat there rather overpowered, mute, but full of sympathy, touched, too, at the splendid confidence of this girl in the future, a confidence only possible when one is young and life unrolls before the dazzled eyes its mirage of glamour, romance, and felicity without end.

The radiant optimism of her! It took my breath away. Her imagination touched the dull metal of existence and transmuted it into shining gold. She saw nothing in this marriage with an underpaid clerk, in this prospect of occupying a semi-detached villa at Surbiton, but enduring happiness. I was stirred. I thought it very fine. I was full of hope that the reality should equal the anticipation.

It was, I think, at that moment that my championship of Gerald was born — I mean, of course, the condition of mind that made such a championship possible, for, up to the present, he needed no champion — was he not enthroned, thrice lucky Gerald, in this girl's great and loyal heart?

CHAPTER XI

PAM and I met him at the station. Pam was in a great state of excitement. The fairies had leaked out — how, goodness only knows! Children have a most enviable faculty of being able to close a door upon all subjects that do not commend themselves to their interest. But the door stands wide open to everything that appeals to their fancy. Tell Pam that she must speak slowly — under the pressure of excitement her words bubble from her rosy little mouth like water from a bottle — and though she dutifully answers, "Yes, Daddy," she has obviously neither listened nor heard. The door is shut — that is all. Suggest that a picnic is toward, or that there is a new sort of jam for tea, and — well, if you can find a more animated little face, or one more radiant with intelligent appreciation, I will eat my hat.

Yes, the indiscreet mention of fairies did the trick. The word "fairy" is "open sesame" to the enchanted cave of Pam's imagination. She may almost be said to have leased the cave for life, and only to issue therefrom under considerable compulsion.

I have never to this day been able to find out whether Pam really sees fairies or not. Her utter disregard of truth is one of her most beautiful traits. To be limited artistically by dry and unassailable facts is the very last thing that would occur to her. She speaks of fairies as you or I would speak of Mr. and Mrs. Brown next door. She drops little bits of gossip about them, in the serious and matter-of-fact tone we should use in mentioning that the Browns had a baby last week. Yet — I often wonder.

"May-I-come-with-you-to-morrow-to-meet-the-fairy-man?" she cried all in one word.

I gave her one glance of paternal pain.

"My dear Pam — if you will speak . . . "

"I know — I know — we're alone, Daddy; you needn't go on. May I? Oh, *please* say yes!"

"All very well," I said weakly. "But what about Mummy?"

Pam reflected. She was lying in bed at the time, and, in order to reflect properly and in a grown-up manner, she pressed the tip of a dainty little forefinger to lips pursed into the semblance of a ripe cherry. As she did so, she looked so adorable that I felt impelled to remove the forefinger and to kiss the place at which it had been pointing.

Pam responded with enthusiasm. Kisses are her natural food; I might say almost her natural language, for there are seasons when I am convinced she thinks entirely in kisses.

"Well," I cried, "what is it?" for her little face had lengthened.

"My music-lesson!"

"It might be postponed? Next day?"

"No." She shook her raven locks with much decision. "It's never next day with Mummy. She never lives in next week either. You know Mummy, don't you, Daddy?"

"I — to a certain extent — yes."

"Ah, but do you know how to get things *out* of her?"

She looked at me exultantly, her eyes bright, her head a little on one side.

Unwilling to undermine maternal authority, I kept silent.

"I see you don't," said Pam, not without pity. "Come here, and I'll tell you. Closer! Put your arms

round me — tight, but not too tight. You *do* love me, Daddy, don't you?"

I assured her gravely of the unaltered permanency of my affection. We kissed. She continued.

"When I was a child . . . " (I suppressed a laugh, it would have been fatal) "and Mummy wanted me to do something I didn't want to do, I always found I had a pain. I know a better way now."

"The devil you do!" I cried with envious admiration.

"Yes, but don't swear, Daddy, and don't squeeze so hard. Promise not to tell."

I made the usual reference to wild horses.

"Well," went on Pam, whispering into my ear, "if you want something badly, and Mummy doesn't, don't be in a hurry. Don't ask for it till you feel she wants to kiss you. You'll get it then."

And that was how Pam and I came to be on the platform awaiting the train.

Now that the moment had actually come, I experienced feelings of indecision. I also felt a little excited, though I flatter myself that I masked my excitement under an air of philosophic composure. I longed yet feared to see the being whom Pam called "the fairy-man." What would he say? What would he do? What would he look like? Should I be sorry or glad that I had invited him? Should I feel his extraordinary influence again? Would any of the others feel it more than I had done? These questions troubled me, but, to confess the truth, the question I put to myself most insistently, and the one which I found most difficult to answer, was: "Why the devil have I asked him here at all?"

Standing there, on the platform, I agreed with Mary that it was eccentricity carried to a quite unaccountable pitch. The remarkable thing was that I visualised the

invitation as the act of a man with whom I had little in common — a man possibly younger, less conventional, more childlike, more capable of enthusiasm, more swayed by impulse than the staid individual I knew myself to be. Yes, this stranger self was alone responsible; and yet at the very moment when his attendance, his ardour, his optimism were most needed, he had, forsooth, found it impossible to be present (for reasons best known to himself; confound him!) and had coolly sent me to take his place. My one and only hope was that this unaccountable and unfamiliar self might turn up at the last moment, or even be discovered travelling with the fairy-man. Should this prove to be the case, I knew that he would instantly take control, and relieve me of all further responsibility.

"When is the train coming, Daddy?"

"Five-forty-five, Pam."

"But it's after that now. I'm so excited. Don't let go my hand. D'you think he'll speak to me? Does he carry fairies about with him? It would be rather stuffy in a box, wouldn't it? But perhaps he makes holes in the lid — or perhaps they are railway-fairies and sit on the hat-rack. Do they, Daddy?"

"Really, Pam, if you will ask . . . "

Fortunately, at this moment, the five-forty-five roared in. I felt Pam's grip tighten. I knew not which of us was most excited. From a third-class compartment sprang a lithe figure. I knew him at once. He saw me. He waved. He smiled. I felt my heart leap. I recognised the symptom. My other self had arrived.

"Come along," I shouted in a whirl of satisfaction, after the first greetings had been exchanged. "Any more luggage? No? This way, then — down these steps. I've a pony-trap outside. Had a decent journey? I've not the foggiest idea where you've come from,

but it doesn't matter! Nothing matters! You're looking fit. By Jove, I *am* glad to see you!"

But, as I would have led the way, he stopped me.

"You've forgotten to introduce me," he said, bowing gallantly in the direction of my only daughter.

Had there been any doubt as to the instantaneousness of his popularity with Pam — which I, for one, refuse to believe — that act of courtesy would have dispelled it at once. To have a grown-up man seriously requesting the honour of an introduction flattered Pam's dignity almost to tears. The little hand she gave him meant much, but the smile she bestowed upon him meant more.

"Pan?" he cried, and I saw Pam start at the unfamiliar appellation — but knew her much too polite to contradict an authority upon fairies. "Pan!" he repeated with delight — "I know Pan. He plays upon pipes, and laughs a great deal. Is he a relation of yours?"

Pam cast a bewildered glance in my direction, but no pipes — except possibly those accountable for soap-bubbles — coming to her aid, she murmured that she didn't know.

"He must be," said the fairy-man with decision. "I see the likeness. You are probably a little elf, or sylph. I'm going to love you — in fact, I've begun already. We must have great times together. Do you ever stay up to watch the sunrise, little Pan?"

"*Never!* They . . . " here my daughter flashed a reproachful glance at me — "they put me to bed."

"To *bed!*" He seemed quite pained.

"Always. In Mummy's room. Where d'you sleep? D'you stay up to watch the sunrise? Does no one send you to bed?"

"I wouldn't go," boasted the fairy-man with a chuckle.

Pam gasped. This far surpassed any naughtiness of which she was capable. I could see her admiration growing by leaps and bounds.

No wonder I was anxious. Pam, too, had undergone a swift metamorphosis. Shyness was forgotten. I was forgotten. Buster was forgotten. Questions, many and indiscreet, bubbled from her rosy lips. She was all aflush with excitement. Still clinging to his brown hand, she stared up into his face with all the eager, fascinated, ardent intensity of credulous childhood.

"I say . . . " — I surreptitiously nudged his arm — "Don't excite her too much. She won't sleep if you do."

"Sleep!" he shouted in jovial mockery. "Who wants to sleep? Life's too short. The world's too beautiful. We can't waste our time sleeping, can we, Pam?"

"I should think not indeed," replied my daughter with tremendous emphasis.

What could I do but shrug my shoulders and lead the way down the stairs, thanking Heaven that at least one member of the party had partly retained his sanity.

Outside the station of Balquhidder there are iron rings cemented into the wall, to one of which I am in the habit of fastening Kitty, when the god of good-fortune permits me to welcome a visitor.

Having released my patient little steed, I looked round for my human companions. Both had vanished.

Now, although the swift and unaccountable comings and goings of the fairy-man smacked of pagan divinities — Mercury or Jupiter, for choice — and although I had not the slightest objection to his turning out to be a god, yet I had the strongest possible objection to his carrying off my only daughter, after the reprehensible custom of his Olympian *confrères*.

I was feeling considerably nonplussed, when Buster

let me into the secret. There was almost a wink in his bloodshot bull-terrier eye as he stood in the doorway of the post-office shop opposite. And, in case that were not sufficient to enlighten human ignorance, there was his tail, pointing inwards, as good as a sign-post. Hastily I crossed the road.

I was just in time to prevent our guest buying any more. My daughter's confession—all but inarticulate, for one cannot suck black-balls and confess clearly at one and the same time—that dear Mr. Fairy-man had presented her with five sorts of sweets, gave me ground for a firm stand.

"Have one, Daddy," encouraged Pam, turning a deaf ear, but holding out a paper-bag.

I stole a look at the fairy-man. He was perched upon the counter, munching with gusto.

"Understand this, Pam," said I virtuously, "I thoroughly disapprove . . . " But, at this point, the laws of good manners insisting that it is not polite to speak with the mouth full, I led the way to the pony-trap in a silence that I flatter myself was nothing if not dignified.

They both sat opposite to me. I looked at our guest. The wonder of his being there at all nearly overcame me, yes, overcame me nearly to the point of believing him to be a vision. Remember, I had seen him only twice, and had spoken to him once. His behaviour upon that memorable occasion had been such as rather to encourage the belief that he *was* a vision. I knew nothing of him. And yet, here he was, in our pony-trap, actually on his way to our house.

That he was far from sharing my bewilderment was obvious. He followed not at all the polite procedure of guests in general. He evinced no praiseworthy interest in my movements, either past or present, neither did he betray any courteous solicitude about Mary's health.

In fact he might have been born and bred in my pony-trap, cuddling my daughter, so thoroughly at home did he look as we jolted along in the sunshine.

His conversation with Pam was either great naturalness or great art. He brought himself down to her level with an ease which bespoke either sympathetic insight of a high order, or the fact that he had not ceased to be a child himself. There is no doubt that his love of sweets, his genial lawlessness, and his lively, and obviously unfeigned interest in all the little things of life — things staled by custom to grown men and women, but which make instant appeal to a child's wonder and curiosity — recommended him irresistibly to Pam.

I had proof of it and to spare at that moment. There sat my daughter, at his side and opposite to me. She had snuggled as close to him as it was possible for a small girl to do — that is, without actually overlapping. Not only that, but she had taken firm possession of his hand and was gazing up into his face with what I can only call the blindest of hero-worship. Of course, I knew that Pam was love — had I not told Mary so many times? — but, from a paternal point of view, I hold that there should be discrimination in all things — even in love.

I am not a jealous man — God forbid! — there is no human weakness I despise more; but I did flatter myself that Pam kept that particular look exclusively for me. We had been lifelong sweethearts, and, now, in ten minutes, I was ousted from my time-honoured position by another man, an entire stranger, whose credentials were apparently a halo fashioned in fairyland, and five sorts of sweets.

And at that an old apprehension returned with greatly increased force. If Pam fell a victim thus instantaneously, what of Mary? What of Diana?

For a horrid moment I was conscious of staring at him — well not with the feelings of a genial and welcoming host. And, then, our eyes encountering, a miracle happened. He smiled — and I, poor weak mortal, smiled too!

CHAPTER XII

I ALWAYS take great pleasure in driving guests to our house. If it chance to be their first visit this pleasure is intensified, and if they prove appreciative, it is doubly intensified.

The satisfaction that one derives from the scenery is not only immense, but cumulative. From Balquhidder station to King's House the scenery is good, from King's House to Balquhidder village it is better, and from Balquhidder village to our house it is best. During the third and last stage, indeed, the road runs through a perfect fairyland of loveliness.

The great hills take it silently to their breasts; the dark pines bend above it, sheltering it within their verdant glooms; the sunlight snatches at it again as it emerges; the rain makes its face shine with a thousand little pools; and, last and most beautiful touch of all, the pale birches, slender and delicately fair, fringe it along the softly sounding margin of the loch with a tremulous screen of light and quivering leafage.

"Look at that!" I usually cry in triumph, pointing to the first delightful glimpse of Loch Voil, and I know that my voice could not express a pleasure more personal, no, nor a pride more proprietary, had I dug and filled it that morning with my own hands.

I like to linger on that road. I know every foot of it, yes, very nearly as intimately as does my friend the old roadmender, who just sits and enjoys the mere look of it, till he sees someone coming, upon which up he gets — with difficulty owing to his rheumatism — and begins forthwith to scratch its back gently with

a weary-looking spade, or to remove a stone that has offended his artistic eye.

It has many delightful associations, but for me the most delightful of all is connected with the day upon which Mary and I explored for the first time the scenic loveliness of the valley, and caught our first glimpse of the house that was destined to become our home — the house in which we were to live so long, and to be so happy.

Would that I could give an adequate idea of the fairy-man's delight in this road, and all that could be seen from it! Delight, however, is not the fitting word. Anyone can take delight in scenery. I can. But my feelings were of a different order to his, less personal, less intimate. The case may best be illustrated by comparing nature to a book. I could admire the paper, the print, and the binding. He could read it. Yes, he seemed on terms of joyous familiarity with all he saw; with the woods, the glens, the burns. The hills it was, however, that excited him most. Again and again did he twist and turn in his seat, nodding at them, smiling, shouting, commenting with indescribable gusto upon their satisfactory appearance. Judging by his behaviour, he might have been the younger brother of every mountain present, returning home after years of exile, and overjoyed at the astonishingly hearty appearance of his relations.

"Sit still," I implored. "How can I balance the trap if you jump about like that?"

Did he hear me? Did he pay attention? Not a bit. He was like Pam; he had shut a door, and one might shout at him as one liked from the other side.

My wonder if possible increased. I was certainly in the most extraordinarily contradictory frame of mind, a state compounded of amazement, bewilderment, amusement, and fascination. Nor must I omit to men-

tion a slight feeling of anxiety — the very natural anxiety of one irretrievably committed to a hazardous experiment. "Well," I mused, "I'm in for it now." And, like a boy who has just set fire to his first rocket, I, as it were, stood back with suppressed excitement, and hoped with all my soul that it would go off well.

A little later we passed over a bridge spanning a burn.

"Lot of water there," I said. "D'you fish?"

His negative, and the glance that accompanied it, made me feel as though my innocent question had reflected seriously upon his morals. I cast a look at his battered portmanteau and wondered vaguely what was in it. I had the extraordinary feeling that anything it contained would be superfluous. No sign of a gun-case; but then I had not previously mentioned shooting, and certainly shrank from doing so after my ill-success with fishing. What on earth did he do with himself? And then I recalled "living, learning, and loving," but did not exactly see how I could hospitably further any one of these rarely mentioned occupations. No doubt the scenery would relieve me of responsibility. It certainly looked like it, for, all at once, he cried:

"Look!" And again he taxed the springs of our governess-cart to their uttermost. "Look at that hill! What a colour! Like a nymph's eyes."

I stared at him. He was all afire — though whether it was the hill or the memory of the nymph that most excited him, I could not at the moment determine. In either case, his enthusiasm was unusual. So infectious was it, however, that it roused a fellow-feeling in me that broke into quite a joyous and companionable little flame. I, too, rejoice in hills, though I am forced to mourn the invisibility of nymphs. It certainly was an opportunity. It might have resulted in what diplomatists call a satisfactory *rapprochement*. That it failed to do so was entirely my fault, or, more correctly speak-

ing, my misfortune. So ridiculously are we constituted that at times the very warmth of our emotions prevents their expression — thus it was with all the shamefacedness of a true-born Briton confronted with genuine feeling, that I muttered:

"Very jolly. Would you mind sitting still? Do you play golf?"

"Good Lord, no! I say, look at that hilltop with a cairn on it like an altar to Apollo! By Jove, that's where I'll be at sunrise!"

All this was particularly demoralising for my daughter. In her ardent eyes, upturned to his glowing face, I saw the flattery that is said to find its sincerest expression in imitation. It was sufficiently difficult, under ordinary circumstances, to make her sit still, but with this mercurial creature instilling his impatience and his enthusiasm into her young breast — I had my hands full.

I am thankful to say that, ere we had gone far, he sobered down — perhaps because I was growing desperate; but though his body was fairly stationary, his mind went leaping about. He asked me, I recollect, if I remembered the trees in Green Park, and confessed to the wish to give them all a good long holiday in the Scottish Highlands. He was prepared to take his oath that the London sparrows would not recognise them when they got back. Here he broke off abruptly to wave a greeting to our blacksmith, who stopped in the act of hammering a horseshoe to stare in scandalised amazement at the demonstration.

Now, I don't call myself an unusually nervous or self-conscious man, and certainly I am not by any means a thrall to the fetish of public opinion — still, I have a certain reputation to support, and when, rounding a bend of the road, I descried a neighbour approaching on a cob, I admit that I felt anxious.

"I say," I adjured my guest, "we'll pass a pal of mine in a minute."

"Splendid! We'll give him a cheer."

"Good God, no! That's the very thing I was going to ask you not to do. Don't even wave to him."

That my request astonished him was evident. So much so, indeed, that I felt compelled to apologise for my apparent eccentricity.

"He wouldn't understand it," I said earnestly.

"Requires an introduction?" asked the fairy-man, with his faintly mocking smile.

"Much more than that. I've known him ten years, and I'd think twice before *I* ventured to wave to him. Here he is. Steady, now, steady!"

When the danger had trotted past with a courteous "Good-morning," I breathed freely.

"Are all the people round here like that?" demanded my guest, gazing in considerable perplexity after the stalwart figure on the cob.

"They're all Britons," I conceded. "Metaphorically their houses are castles with the drawbridges raised. I don't blame them. I've got rather like that myself. It's in the air — perhaps it's the climate."

"Won't they make friends?"

The naïve simplicity of the question caused me to smile. It was precisely the sort of question that Pam might have asked — and there she was at his side, eagerly listening.

"Make friends?" I said dubiously, and affecting a gravity I was far from feeling. "No one *makes* friends. Friends are born, not made; though fate, or coincidence, generally appears to preside at their birth. The way you and I met in London is an example. But cheer up! We're expecting two other guests to-morrow. I hope you'll be friends with them."

"I know. Lady Desmond. Mummy told me," cried Pam, overjoyed to take part in a grown-up, and yet comprehensible, conversation. "Shall we go to meet her, Daddy, or not?"

"Or not," I replied solemnly; then, as her smile faded: "Never mind dear, you'll see her when she arrives."

"Is she of the elect?" asked the fairy-man.

It seemed a curious question. He asked it as seriously as though he had enquired whether or no she belonged to the Empress Club. When I begged him to explain, his definition certainly coincided with the meaning as given in the dictionary, but when I asked him for what reason they were chosen, by whom, and for what useful purpose, his answers did not seem to have any significance.

"I see," I said, claiming vision merely to conceal the lack of it.

"Does she pride herself on doing things?" he asked, with what seemed a touch of scepticism.

"Doing things? No. She does nothing — but she does it very gracefully. Mind you, she's quite capable of doing anything at any moment, particularly if not expected to do it. The garden of her mind can grow any mortal thing, though to the casual eye it appears to be overrun with that little western flower love-in-idleness. — Pam, don't jerk the reins."

"Let me drive, Daddy?"

I resigned the government of Kitty, but wisely retained possession of the whip.

And then — I found myself talking, imparting information, airing opinions, and answering questions that I find great difficulty in believing were ever asked, at least not aloud. So far was I from realising this at the time that I thought I was talking of my own free will.

"A widow," he commented. "So you didn't hit it off with her husband, eh?"

I experienced a shock. Had I mentioned widows? Had I been indiscreet enough to enter into details as purely personal as that I had never cared violently for Gamine's husband — a confession, mind you, that I had made to no one, not even to Mary. And then I seemed to hear him ask if she were pretty. Thank the gods, Pam rushed to my rescue.

"She's as pretty as a picture on a chocolate-box — Daddy has her photograph," vociferated my small daughter, jumping up and down. "I've never seen her myself, but Mummy says she uses too much scent, though she has lovely clothes outside, and wears silk —"

"That'll do, Pam," I interrupted. "And for goodness' sake keep your feet off mine."

"And who is the other guest?" enquired the fairy-man.

"Mr. Vernon," supplied Pam the irrepressible. "Mummy loves him."

My glance, though powerful enough to have abashed a large male tiger, had less than no effect on a small female child.

"And you don't?" encouraged the fairy-man.

"He talks to me, but doesn't think about me," said Pam thoughtfully. "That's why he says the wrong things, and is glad when Mummy comes into the room. Mummy says I must be very polite to him, because God has never given him a little girl of his own. I'm sure you must have a little girl of your own, dear Mr. Fairy-man, for you —"

"Let's all get out," I urged hastily. "Here's a hill."

Leading our little steed well in advance of my companions, I endeavoured to compose my thoughts. "Great Cæsar!" I reflected. "This man is practically

a stranger. What on earth induced me to open my heart to him like that? Pam too! Extraordinary!"

Now, it so chanced that, as we neared the house, Diana was returning from one of her tremendous walks. She did not see us, but we saw her. Through the sunlight she swung, hat in hand as usual, her easy, effortless stride beautiful to watch as running water, or sailing cloud.

"Who's that?"

It was the voice of our guest. He was staring at Diana with a strange, eager light in his eyes.

"That's Diana," explained Pam, proud of being able to supply information.

"Yes," I corroborated, and Mary's voice, the soul of all propriety, seemed to be lent to me for the occasion. "That is Pam's governess."

"Governess!" he cried, and had I said, "That is Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt," he could not have looked more incredulous, no, nor more taken aback.

"Why not?" demanded I, in considerable astonishment.

He stood stock-still in the middle of the road, and his eyes danced after Diana until she finally turned in at the gate.

"D'you know her? Have you met her?" I questioned with great interest.

He made no attempt to answer.

"Governess!" he again ejaculated. Then, for the first time becoming aware of my bewilderment, he suddenly clapped me on the back, and burst into shouts of ironical laughter, for all the world as though I had been guilty of some preposterous joke.

CHAPTER XIII

MARY, seated before a little work-table in her bedroom, was putting a few stitches into some fabric of a filmy nature. At a question from me, she withdrew her needle, severed the thread with her white teeth, and glanced up with a twinkle in her brown eyes.

"I certainly like him," she admitted. "But you didn't make him out half handsome enough. Pam adores him."

"So unusual," she murmured, holding the something filmy up to her neck, and trying to see the effect in the looking-glass. And then she narrated to me how nearly she had been embraced by the arriving guest — an episode, by the way, which, for my peace of mind, I had fortunately missed through being occupied with his luggage.

Upon my pointing out to her — not as a reproach, but merely as a warning — that I failed to see any symptoms of chaste indignation, she merely informed me calmly that it had seemed highly natural at the time, and even appropriate: "Just as if he had been my own son coming home for the holidays."

I coughed sceptically. Her age, I knew to be thirty-five. The "son" was nearer thirty than twenty. Not even Mary's undeniable genius for creating delectable situations could compass such a miraculous maternal feat.

She listened patiently, but without much interest, to my deductions; then, rising, and moving to the dressing-table, gave it as her opinion that age had nothing to do with it; and finished up with the remarkable

statement that age could not be associated with him at all.

This, coming entirely off Mary's own bat, interested me enormously. Was it not plain that she considered him an immortal? Of course, she herself was totally unaware of the significance of the admission, but that she had made it in cold blood, and entirely unassisted by her husband, was an event of the highest importance.

"It's queer—" I heard her say half to herself, and then she gave a little incredulous laugh. "Penelope? Why did he call me Penelope?"

"He seemed to see some resemblance. He said something about my being a good deal from home."

Mary applauding this unwarrantable accusation, a little conjugal difference of opinion ensued.

"If the goodly Odysseus had confined himself to a fortnightly trip to London once a year, Homer wouldn't have thought it worth his while to write about him at all," I illustrated, with considerable heat.

Feeling the need of both comprehension and sympathy, I endeavoured to explain to her something of the extraordinary magnetic influence under which I had fallen during the drive from the station. "Of course," I went on, "I've felt it before. I told you so, didn't I? But to-day—well—it took me aback. With Pam sitting there, too. I admit I'm nervous. One can't tell what the devil he'll say, or do, next. Why, anything might happen—anything! You needn't smile like that. You may feel it too; or if you don't, it'll be all of a piece with your amazing, your preposterous placidity. I don't believe there's another woman like you in the world."

"That's what you ought to think. That's what I like you to think," said Mary, and her eyes softened.

It was the answer that turneth away wrath, and I gratefully acknowledged it as I kissed her hand. After all, I'm a lucky dog. There is about Mary a plump and pleasing serenity that anchors one delightfully to material existence. I would most certainly diagnose her as a sweet and very feminine soul, quite satisfied to reside during this life in her fascinating earthly envelope, and quite content to leave the unseen until she is able to see it.

"I wonder what he drinks?" she mused.

"Drinks!" And I knew, as certainly as I knew that I was sitting in her bedroom, that if it hadn't been "drinks," it would have been "eats!" Well, well, it ill became me to cavil at a materiality so conducive to internal well-being. Heaven knows, and I trust forgives, that I am by no means indifferent to the fleshpots of Mary.

The blessed juice of the grape was discussed at some length. Folly, masquerading as champagne, was not considered sufficiently natural; its sparkle was forced. Intoxication from the banks of the Rhine, disguised as hock, was waved aside. Claret — thin and sour old maid — was told to begone. Thank heaven, whiskey and beer knew their places, which were assuredly not at a banquet given in honour of a young Greek god. Port put in an undoubted claim; but port was too crusty and cobwebby an old gentleman to be the table companion of eternal youth. Burgundy, generous and full-blooded, red as a sunset and glowing as the heart of a rose, carried off the palm.

My reasons for the choice were transparent enough, at least to myself. Was not burgundy the tipple for jolly satyrs with attendant nymphs? — yes, and for all the mad rout of Bacchus — Bacchus, the personal and intimate friend of our Olympian guest? Did it not suggest ivy-crowns, and harnessed leopards, and old

Silenus on his ass, and the god of wine himself, "tipsily quaffing," and a rush of revelry breaking the dewy silence of uplands at dawn? Of its appropriateness there could be no manner of doubt, and, as all my world knows, I have a perfect passion for the appropriate.

So much for me. But what about Mary? All silently, I wondered. Women are astounding. There is no doubt that intuition in a woman is equal, if not superior, to the most expensive classical education.

We continued to discuss our guest. Mary wondered what we could do to amuse him. There was, she averred, so little for a man to kill; but I assured her that the fairy-man was as averse to taking life as a Buddhist, and that all he wanted was nature, wild nature with just a dash of human.

But Mary paid scant attention to this, being engaged in testing her complexion with a green ribbon.

"I wonder," she said, "I wonder." Then, with feminine inconsequence, "I don't see why you call him dangerous."

I had not expected that she would, and told her so in terms which any unbiased auditor would have considered a delicate compliment. My laudatory little speech, however, weighed in the balance, was found wanting, for if there be one thing that Mary takes exception to it is being told that she is what she is. In her secret heart she yearns, I firmly believe, to be considered inconceivably experienced and fascinatingly wicked.

The conversation returning to our guest, — with a persistency that struck me afterwards as singular, — I told her how, according to his own account, he passed his time. Mary listened with attention.

"Living, learning, and loving?" she mused. "Well, isn't that what we all do?"

I expressed a pious doubt.

"We all love," argued Mary.

"Not promiscuously."

"But universally. *I* do."

I smiled. I knew Mary's religion to be based on universal love. To turn a bad man into a good man, Mary is convinced that she has only to love him; and if, after being loved, he obdurately remains bad, then Mary is convinced that she has not loved him enough. In theory this was perfectly simple, perfectly delightful. But in practice — well, my lips are sealed!

"What are you thinking of, Jack?"

I was careful not to inform her. I knew that the depth of my conversation, and even the profundity of my silence, is not without a peculiar fascination for Mary — she finds it so difficult to separate the grain from the chaff.

"All very well —" she objected, in a tone that informed me that it was not very well. And then I was advised to go and finish dressing, as the wine had still to be fetched from the cellar, and I was certain to be late.

I was about to leave the room, when I turned and said:

"By the way, he has rather a curious effect on Diana."

Requested to explain, I touched upon my misgivings, only to be informed that I was becoming mentally unbalanced.

"But — you can't deny —" I protested warmly.

"I do deny," said Mary, shutting up her trinket-box with a snap, and rising with decision. "I don't know what you are going to say, but if it has anything to do with mythology, I deny it absolutely."

"And what is more —" she continued with unusual volubility, and I found that there was a great deal

more. Pam flashed to memory. "Never speak when Mummy is speaking," my daughter had counselled on one occasion. I acted on the advice.

"She isn't herself with him," I remarked at the first lull.

"Who is she?" demanded Mary.

This was confusing, but I got out of it rather cleverly by reminding her that it doesn't change a beech tree to be called an oak.

"No," I continued quickly, "I'm not mad. It's only that I see deeper into things than you do. Of course — this time — well, you didn't see them meeting, and I did. It was after Pam and I had taken Kitty to the field. The fairy-man was talking to us, when we saw Diana coming down the drive. Of course I introduced them. The effect was extraordinary. They both absolutely forgot me."

"That *was* extraordinary!"

"It was," I agreed, resisting with difficulty her sudden smile. "It implied mental aberration of a pronounced order. They were too — too bowled over, I suppose — to remember their manners. They were feeling something at first sight — not love, of course — perhaps it was second sight — I don't know."

I was reminded that Diana was engaged to be married.

"Half of her," I said quickly.

That brought down the vials of Mary's wrath. I was asked if I wanted to drive her crazy.

"You should have heard him laugh," I pleaded. "Yes, at the mere idea of her being a governess. He seemed to know better."

Observing Mary's foot to tap the carpet, I continued hurriedly:

"Then why did he want to see her run? A girl like that — he might have taken it for granted. All right,

my dear, don't get impatient. The very first thing he said to her was: 'I'll race you to that bridge.'"

I enjoyed Mary's astonishment.

"Yes, and the amazing thing was that she wasn't amazed. It was exactly as if — how shall I tell you? — as if it were the sequel to something that had happened before. No sooner had he said 'bridge,' than she was off."

"Yes," I went on, for Mary seemed to be deprived of words, "he was after her like a greyhound after a hare, but, all the same, I suspected — "

"Suspected — ?" ejaculated Mary, recovering speech.

"That it was a put-up job. I mean that it was a sort of test; that he had seen her run before — somewhere — sometime."

"But — "

"Wait a minute. Haven't you noticed that there's a lot of character in the way girls run? Some fling out their legs as though they never wanted to see them again. But Diana runs like a boy, like an athlete, straight from the hips."

"But, what has that got to do — "

"Everything. Don't you see that he must have been influenced by some ulterior motive — otherwise — why did he keep behind?"

"Because he couldn't keep up."

"Nonsense! Look at his build. He's a sprinter, my dear, if ever there was one. It was a pulled race from the very start. He ought to be warned off the turf. He won't take her vocation seriously. Confound the fellow, does he think we keep governesses for racing?"

Mary was deep in thought.

"Jack — look!"

She had apparently caught sight of something unusual in the mirror.

"A grey hair," she ejaculated.

In view of my proprietary interest, I joined in the inspection. Yes, there it was, a silver thread among the brown.

"The beginning," she murmured, and in her voice rang all the emotions of a woman who has lost her first battle with Father Time.

I, too, was moved. I seemed to see Mary as I remembered her years before — a slip of a girl — but never dearer than at that moment.

"Grow old along with me," I quoted softly.

CHAPTER XIV

DINNER was over. I had waited behind to blow out the candles before leaving the room, when, suddenly, I saw Diana standing at the open door.

"Hello!" I said, "you startled me. I thought you were upstairs."

She did not reply, and I, occupied with putting the wine decanters into the cupboard, did not speak again, or indeed notice her, till on my way back to the table.

"You look like a wraith," I said, observing her more closely. "If it's possible for a wraith to wear such a pretty evening frock," I added, smiling.

My simile was not far wide of the mark, for Diana, standing there silent, all black save for her white face and neck, did affect the imagination much as a wraith might have done.

My little attempt at a joke fell flat. And then I instantly saw that humour, however kindly meant, would but rebuff the tentative and wistful desire for sympathy and comprehension that had induced the girl to overcome her timidity and seek my society. There was something strangely tense in her attitude. Concern sat upon her features, and gazed from her anxious eyes. Whatever it was that troubled her, she was taking it very seriously. The capacity to disarm life's unwelcome incidents with a smile comes only with the mellowing years. I was sorry. Had she been of the philosophic age, I could so easily have lifted half her load with a jest, but, as it was, I realised that I must meet her on her own ground, or not at all.

"Well?" I said interrogatively.

She came nearer. "You know," she whispered. Her lips barely moved. It seemed to me the tremulous passage of a thought, of a fear, rather than the articulate utterance of words. In a low voice I disclaimed all knowledge. What did I know, save that the serene and radiant soul of her had departed, and that I missed it?

"I told you so much — so much more than anyone else."

It was as though she reproached me. I murmured something. She might find me lacking in understanding — but not in sympathy. No.

The little pucker in her brows disappeared.

When I questioned her again, she started slightly, appeared to recall her thoughts with an effort to the actual room we stood in, looked at me with awed, troubled, bewildered eyes, then whispered that *he* was here.

"He?" I ejaculated, for the moment as bewildered as herself. Then, with sudden comprehension: "But why should that upset you?"

"I didn't tell you all."

The murmur barely reached me. I realised that Diana was collecting her thoughts, perhaps debating how much she would tell me. I kept silent, not wishing to influence her decision. The house was very quiet. An air of illusion pervaded the dimly lit room, as though we were both living in a world of phantasy.

All at once, she began to speak. Her words came low, but rapidly, in little breathless gushes of reminiscence, troubling the profound quiet of the night. It struck me that she was afraid of being overheard, though, as the dining-room door stood open, no possible eavesdropper could have approached us undetected. For all that, she broke off once or twice to listen and hold her breath, thereby imparting to our interview an

air of mystery, strangely foreign to our familiar dining-room.

As she proceeded, I became aware that I was again being confided in, and, very sensible of the honour, applied myself to listen with grave attention.

"A dream?" I commented doubtfully, when she had finished.

But very earnestly she assured me that it was more than just an ordinary dream — much more; that all the details of our house, as well as its scenic surroundings, had been shown her clearly and with a certain ominous significance, vaguely alarming — "a warning," she phrased it in a whisper.

"And he was in it, you say?"

A slight affirmative motion of her head.

"And — music?"

"Singing," she whispered. "His voice." She had recognised it at once, even in his speaking voice. In the dream it had been an influence that had frightened her at the time, and haunted her afterwards.

"Strange — " I mused. "Of course, dreams are — Did you tell anyone?"

She explained that the revelation had taken place on the night before she had come to us. Naturally, it had upset her. Daylight had not at once banished it. The haunting recollection of that voice had troubled her profoundly even while she dressed — yes, and followed her downstairs, like a moving sound-atmosphere, to her accustomed place at the breakfast-table opposite her mother.

Mother! There is something sacred in the name. But if, for Diana, it awakened no reverential tenderness, the fault, I felt convinced, did not lie with her. She touched upon her narration at the breakfast-table with obvious reluctance, replying to questions rather than volunteering information. She would have

shielded her mother from even the possibility of criticism; but I was in possession of facts almost before she was aware of it.

For me the picture hung unveiled. I could visualise it clearly: the mother, installed behind the matutinal tea-pot, hard, efficient, intolerant, crushing what she called "silly, superstitious fancies," with the sheer weight of common-sense — and the daughter, toying with an untasted breakfast, still under the uneasy spell of her dream, longing in vain for a little tenderness, a little sympathy, a little comprehension, but shrinking into herself under the lash of an undeniably caustic tongue.

And then, the journey, the arrival, the recognition, yes, of even the isolated position of the house, the wild and romantic beauty of its surroundings, and more especially the spirit that steeped all things, from the little loch to the mountain-tops, in the light that may be supposed to fall upon fairyland.

The family, *our* family, had proved, I was glad to hear, rather reassuring than otherwise. It was not till to-day, she faltered, that the details of her dream had rushed back, recalled from the limbo of half-forgotten things by the face, the presence, and more particularly the voice of the unaccountable fairy-man.

She fell silent. But though she ceased to speak, I felt that her strange discomposure remained unabated.

"But — Diana" — I voiced my perplexity — "I don't understand. You seemed happy. You laughed. You seemed to like him."

"That's just it," she cried, in swift distress.

"Just it," I echoed, and thereupon became speechless. Where was the beautiful consistency with which I had admiringly credited her? Was the fault mine? Was I unreasonable in expecting reasonableness from a daughter of Eve?

My thoughts reverted to the dinner — Mary and I at top and bottom of the table — Diana and the fairy-man facing each other at the sides. My eyes had rested on them often, irresistibly attracted. And when Mary's calm and gentle gaze encountered mine, I saw that she, too, thought as I did.

Youth! Beauty! What a power they are! What can all the kingdoms of the earth offer in comparison? And Mary and I, listening, looking on, seemed worlds away, twenty long years removed.

It had been a merry meal for all that. The burgundy had not been neglected. Under its genial influence the fairy-man had done most of the talking, but Diana had listened, and glowed, and once — at some jocular absurdity — her gay young laugh had rung out, swiftly responsive, a joy to hear.

I reminded Diana of all this, as one might reason with a wayward child. Gently, but very decidedly, she shook her head.

"But the race —" I insisted; "that race to the bridge?"

But very poignantly she assured me that that had not been her at all. She gave me to understand that she only remembered it as we all remember things done in a dream, things impossible, and even shocking to propriety.

For a few moments neither of us spoke. Then, all at once, she raised her head and looked full at me. So near was she that nothing escaped me, neither the pathetic line of her lips, nor the sorrowful appeal in her eyes. But, when I asked her earnestly what I could do to help her, she shook her head. The few faltered words that subsequently escaped her genuinely distressed me. And always an immense bewilderment was to be felt.

And I was powerless to comfort her. She eluded me.

She took refuge in a sanctuary of silence. In silence alone was I privileged to follow her.

It was, I thought, peculiarly significant that Gerald was never once mentioned. But he was present to both of us, as unmistakably present as though he stood before us in the flesh. It was infinitely delicate — too delicate for speech, almost too delicate for thought. I shrank from even the appearance of obtruding. I might be wrong. And yet it was borne in upon me that the real cause of her distress was to be found, not in how the situation affected her personally, but in the fear that the apparent lightness of her conduct might make her unworthy of Gerald's love.

Blowing out the last candle, I turned to her and said: "Diana, we had better go upstairs. They'll wonder —"

The remaining words were cut from my lips by Diana's hand on my arm. In the obscurity I saw the black silhouette that represented my companion become taut. A laugh had floated down to us from above, presumably from the drawing-room. In a flash, I realised something of what Diana was going through. That laugh told me. It was the sound for which she had been listening — the sound she had dreaded to hear. Standing there in the dark, feeling for and with the agitated girl, I ignored its note of irresponsible joy, and thought of it only as an eerie and incomprehensible sound to issue from human lips.

"It's all right, Diana," I lied reassuringly.

"It's not — it's not!" she contradicted passionately, and her breath came warm on my face. "It's not all right. I'm frightened." She stopped, struggled for control, then whispered: "It's more than that, much more."

CHAPTER XV

We found Mary and the fairy-man deep in conversation. Mary was seated in the armchair that is hers by right of courtesy, at the corner of the fireplace near the eastern window; while he was on a stool at her feet.

There he was, his arms clasping his knees; his head flung back, his laughing face upturned to her sweet, placid, smiling countenance, talking and gesticulating with animation.

"Thick as thieves," I thought, and wondered. It was unlike my Mary. She is not given to mushroom friendships. On the contrary, her friends are few, but grappled to her soul with hooks of steel. And even with them she "ay keeps something to hersel'" — something that I know is sacred. Fully aware of this, I was the more surprised to see that she had for once made an exception, and had admitted the fairy-man, if not into the inner temple, then, at all events, into the outer court.

And the honoured guest was responding to this benign and maternal influence in a way that did one's heart good to see.

As I followed Diana into the room, I kept him under observation. Of a sudden, his conversation — a stream of gay nonsense as it seemed to me — faltered, then ceased. He made a movement as though to leap up, but sat still. His eyes, all aglow, riveted themselves on Diana. A smile hovered on his lips, a curious, sidelong smile, at once wild and elusive.

It was plain that the memory summoned up in his

mind by Diana — if memory indeed it were — had frankly delighted him. But there was something more. I find it difficult to describe, for it evades, and yet transcends description. It seemed unaccountable, considering that he had never met her before. But, the fact remains, that there shone from him a joyous familiarity, a laughing intimacy, a total absence of the deferential respect that would of necessity be instinctively and chivalrously accorded by a man of the world to a young lady met that afternoon for the first time.

I turned quickly towards Diana.

Almost in the middle of the room she stood, as motionless, as rigid, as though the old-world tale of Galatea had been reversed, and a living, breathing girl had, by the power of some wicked necromancer, been transformed into a beautiful statue.

She was gazing down at him, her eyes deep within his. Was she frightened? Was she fascinated? I could not tell. But that she was moved was incontestable.

What I would have said, or done, I cannot tell: but all necessity for intervention was rendered unnecessary by the fairy-man himself. I was astounded when, with a look that seemed the prelude to some unusual intimacy, I heard him ask her to play something.

I could have laughed aloud — at the anti-climax, perhaps, at my heated imagination, more probably. The relief I undoubtedly experienced was tinged with an amused scorn for my foolish and immature deductions. Of course I was profoundly thankful that I had not interfered. And yet, when the fairy-man sprang to his feet, with one clean leap, and followed Diana to the piano, he looked as ill-fitted to turn pages and murmur laudatory inanities as a stag.

I wheeled my chair to face the piano, and stoked up my pipe.

The mellow lamplight shone upon them. I confess to

experiencing at one and the same moment an æsthetic pleasure and a secret anxiety.

"They've entirely forgotten us," I meditated, glancing at, and mentally addressing Mary, but her expression of gentle beatitude informed me that my telepathy had missed its mark. I wondered if she, too, were admiring the picture they made, and if to her also the thought came that the present vital, flowering moment was the inevitable outcome of the past, the meeting of two lines of life, fated to meet by an irrevocable destiny, to meet in our house, in this way, and none other.

I was abruptly roused from my meditations. Diana had begun to play. I listened, full of wonder.

Now, though Mary says I am not musical, because I cannot sing in tune, I know myself to be very responsive to the influence of music. I could not have told who composed the strange thing conjured up by those swift fingers, nor in what key it was written, but I saw plainly enough what it represented. It represented Diana, but not our governess — by no means our governess!

She was playing for the fairy-man alone. I felt sure of it. And he, too, knew it. That, then, was why he had asked her to play. My imagination had not been so much at fault after all. I recalled the Russian violinist in the London restaurant, and how he, also, had felt impelled to unmask himself in music — to testify, as it were, to the fairy-faith that was in him.

Music was their language "out there." The fairy-man had made use of this extraordinary statement more than once. And now, he was using his power over Diana to make her remember, to make her speak to him in music, to make her unveil the very secrets of her being. He was not standing at her side — there were no pages to turn — but had placed himself where he could see her face. And as Diana peeped from her

music, much as a nymph might peep from a brake — listened, danced, started, eluded, fled — enacted all over again some dewy episode, of who shall say how long ago, his strange eyes expanded and glowed.

Sitting there, neglected pipe in hand, I became absorbed, excited, spellbound. When the airy rush of notes, like the patter of flying feet, was overtaken by a chord, swift, final, triumphant, I was left facing the silence, much as a breathless spectator might face a curtain fallen upon an uncompleted play.

"Thank you, Diana," said Mary smiling; "you played that very nicely."

CHAPTER XVI

I WAS just starting to refill my pipe when I heard Mary's voice asking a perfectly preposterous question.

"Do you really believe in fairies?" said she, and, entirely unaware of the *faux pas* she was committing, there she was, smiling serenely up at him with an air of lenient, and even tender, incredulity.

It was a mercy I did not laugh aloud — that I was within an ace of doing so, I freely admit.

Believe! Mark the word. It was delicious. Believe? Why, according to his own statements he practically lived with the fairies! He was *the fairy-man!* As well ask a schoolmaster if he believes in boys. (He would probably reply, "I wish I didn't," but even that would not excuse the heinous futility of the question.) But I need not have scoffed at Mary, for, before the night was much older, I was destined to ask much the same sort of foolish question myself.

I must say, our guest took it very well. No one could deny him great good-nature. His answering smile was tinged with amused tolerance. I chuckled inaudibly. To me the joke lay in the fact that each thought the other the joke, quite unaware that neither would have been really funny without collaboration.

Leaning against the mantelpiece, toasting himself in the grateful warmth, — for I noticed that, like Buster, he always tried to get as close to a fire as possible, — the fairy-man narrated what he claimed to be a personal experience. As he proceeded, I felt my eyebrows rising; and, at last, taking my pipe out of my mouth, I fell to considering him, much as a mouse might con-

sider a piece of cheese in a trap. This was either a joke, or beyond a joke.

The dusk lent the story mystery; yes, and a sort of haunting charm. The hour of gathering shadows is indubitably the golden opportunity of those who wish to impose upon the credulity of others. His manner of telling it, too, left nothing to be desired. That he himself believed in it was, I felt, beyond question. Almost against my will, my imagination was stirred, excited. I could see it all; and — shall I confess it? — something in me ached for it to be true.

When he had finished, I stole a sly look at the ladies. How had they stood the test? One glance enlightened me. The weird narrative had as obviously gone to Diana's head as though it had been a super-intoxicating draught prescribed by Bacchus himself. I am thankful, however, to be able to state that Mary's interest had not interfered with her domestic usefulness. She was, I could see, firmly anchored to normality by Pam's blue-cotton pants. Her smile — as she held the little garment at arms' length, the more to admire the effect of a patch — tickled me immensely. I knew so exactly what it meant. I had seen it on many previous occasions, more particularly when Pam imparted the delightful and breathlessly babbled information that she had just been taking afternoon tea with the fairies.

There fell a little silence — incredulous, I fear, in two human breasts, but passionately credulous in one. I felt that it was up to me to break it in the cause of common-sense.

"A gnome?" I commented thoughtfully, and I hope politely, as I gently knocked the ashes out of my pipe. "My dear fellow, are you quite sure it wasn't a tree-stump? I'm willing to admit, for the sake of argument, that certain fairies look like tree-stumps, so why shouldn't certain tree-stumps look like fairies?"

Gazing blandly round our little circle, I saw, to my sorrow, that where I was understood, I wasn't approved of — and where I was approved of, I wasn't understood.

"What I mean is" — continued I, pointing my pipe at the fairy-man — "that tree-stumps look green, you know. Besides, you were only a child. All right, Mary, all right — I'm not disputing it."

And having been made to feel that I was in the minority, for this one person who might have backed me up had not the courage of her unbelief, I shrugged my shoulders and sought solace in a whiskey-and-soda.

Encouraged by the motherly patronage of my wife, flattered by the breathless interest of Diana, the fairy-man continued to enlarge upon fairies — not very willingly, I must admit, for he had to be coaxed, and even then he seemed to think we might all be better employed doing something exciting, though what on earth he wanted us to do I had not the faintest idea — card-tricks, perhaps. Not that the subject of fairies bored him, but he appeared to take their existence so much for granted that he considered time passed in accounting for it to be simply time wasted in demonstrating the obvious. A parallel case would be that of a school-boy, home for the holidays, requested by his parents to prove the existence of the boys in his class.

Sitting there — in the front row of the stalls, so to speak — I got a good deal of quiet fun out of the performance. The fairy-man began by bemoaning the incredulous attitude of the world in general towards the gods and goddesses of antiquity.

"They think they're dead!" he exclaimed, with an incredulous lift of his eyebrows.

At that, I eagerly pricked up my ears; and, encountering Mary's brown eyes slyly smiling, I nodded back at her, a little defiant, as became a man touched on a

weak spot, but none the less filled with the courage of his hallucinations.

"It isn't so much that they imagine them dead," I said warmly, "as that they deny that they have ever been alive."

The fairy-man flashed a glance at me. I felt that not only had he decided to overlook the tree-stump, but that he had reinstated me in the ranks of the elect. I very nearly recaptured the lost art of blushing.

We were then informed that the old world of mythology was as alive to-day as ever it had been — which, by the way, was highly probable! He knew. He heard. He saw. He gave astonishing instances. He launched into startling details. Unexpected encounters on moonlit nights — chance meetings on dewy hill-tops at dawn. I listened, and glowed. Our drawing-room had disappeared. We were back in the third century B. C. We were listening to an Idyl of Theocritus.

"Song" — affirmed the fairy-man — "is their language."

"Oh, I *do* like that!" cried Mary brightly, as she looked up from unpicking a hem, "I often think we don't sing half enough."

"You always stop me," I commented.

"Everything sings," expounded the fairy-man.

"In tune," murmured Mary.

Wisely ignoring this, I observed:

"It would certainly make life lyrical. And it might even make it funny."

Again becoming aware of disapproval, I continued hurriedly:

"I mean as funny as a comic opera. An impatient cantata now, when breakfast is late, or the cook has forgotten to clean the boots, strikes me as — "

"Please go on, fairy-man," broke in the voice of Diana.

I looked at her quickly, and with amazement. That she should have interrupted me was sufficiently extraordinary — for her manners were perfect — but that she should be transparently unconscious of having interrupted me was of ominous significance. To the best of my belief, it was the first time that she had directly addressed the fairy-man, and her tone, and the use of his nickname, seemed to prove that the fear I had noticed during our interview in the dining-room had become a thing of the past. But the absence of fear did not bring me relief, for, almost against my will, I was forced to the conclusion that there had crept over her a very curious and subtle change.

Outwardly, of course, she was the same, but the animating spirit was, somehow, different. As I have said, it was with extreme reluctance, amounting to distaste, that I acknowledged this transformation. Had I not witnessed it in operation, I should not have believed it possible, for, in spite of all that Diana had told me, I was still loath to admit the fantastic theory of dual personality.

Reasoning it out later, I tried to explain the mysterious phenomenon by calling it a mood, or, rather, the extreme accentuation of a mood. We are all compact of moods. A man at the mercy of moods changes his personality many times a day — and assuredly is a different being when inflamed by anger than when under the genial influence of benevolence.

Watching Diana closely, and with a secret and growing anxiety, I was conscious that this strange other-self was unable to take possession all at once. Like a flame, it waxed and it waned. There were evidences of internal conflict. It had swept over her suddenly upon her entry into the drawing-room — had come within measurable distance of complete possession while she played the piano — had all but suffered

extinction when, standing by Mary's side, she had discussed some domestic arrangement connected with Pam.

And now, as of her own accord she addressed the fairy-man, half forgetting her timidity and discomposure in the ardent, dancing light of his eyes, I saw unmistakable signs of the conflict I have already mentioned. She was warming, yielding, beginning all unconsciously to reflect somewhat of his animated glow, and yet, at the same time, half fearful, clinging tight with both hands, as it were, to slowly vanishing normality. She had reached a halfway house. Yes, but would she be able to stay there?

For a moment my jocularity flagged. It had been a little forced, as jocularity produced of set purpose must always be, and as, apparently, it had not assisted poor, drifting Diana to float on the surface, it came near to being discarded.

With all my heart, I longed to get her out of the room, to bed, anywhere. I wanted to shield her; to conceal her condition from the fairy-man; for Gerald's sake, and, yes, greatly for my own, too. I was trembling lest in this disconcerting gradual changing process something of paramount importance might go. What? Self-control, perhaps. Something, at all events, whose loss would leave her defenceless.

"Please go on, fairy-man," urged Diana.

I listened, and stared, and thrilled. This was indeed a new Diana! Her manner had acquired a singular charm, that I can only describe by calling shyly mythological and nymph-like. So potent was its magic influence that it fascinated me; even while anxiety and pity ached in my heart. As for the fairy-man, something within him seemed to leap into a glad newness of recognition. His face shone. His eyes emitted light. Turning eagerly to her, he at once obeyed her request.

The theory he expounded was ingenious, and certainly not without interest, though the world in general would term it "moonshine." As a matter of fact, I was too perturbed to accord it more than a partial attention. Within me, too, was conflict—a fight between the old compelling fascination of the fairy-man, and my newly born championship of Diana.

"A very pretty idea," said Mary, looking up as he concluded, and rewarding his explanation with a smile; "I must tell Pam. She loves fairy-tales."

Diana was beyond words.

"All very well—" I muttered.

There was another little silence, during which the fairy-man poked the fire without permission asked, or granted.

"You mean to tell us you see them?" I asked, staring at him.

He appeared to find me amusing.

"As clearly as I see you."

That silenced me. It would have been the height of folly to deny that he saw me—the fellow was looking right at me; and I had no proof that he did not see them. Besides,—as Mary's eyebrows were anxiously endeavouring to convey to me,—however preposterous he might be, he was still our guest. I sought refuge in my pipe.

CHAPTER XVII

A REMARK from our guest guided the conversation into very debatable channels. Having flung himself down at Mary's feet, he lay there at full length, his elbow on the floor, his dark head propped on the palm of his hand. His eyes, as though fascinated, watched the leaping flames. His attitude and expression evinced such complete, sensuous satisfaction, such utter disregard of the fact that, by his position, he was keeping the fire from everyone else, that he reminded me again of Buster. But the comparison could be bettered, for he was much more like a black panther with green eyes than a white bull-terrier with black ones.

"Reincarnation?" doubted Mary. "You believe in it, fairy-man?"

"It isn't a question of belief with me," he said with unusual thoughtfulness. "It's a question of knowing. The soul puts on other personalities, just as the mind puts on different moods, and the body puts on different flesh."

"Even the trees could tell you that," he added.

"And flowers," murmured Diana, dreamingly.

"I don't think I take much interest in my past," said Mary.

"That's because I've made her present so comfortable," I explained to the company at large.

"You still weave the web," smiled the fairy-man, touching the useful work upon Mary's knee. "And you still are Penelope."

"Minus the wooers," I murmured.

"He's jealous," jested the guest, "and perhaps not

without cause, Penelope; for, do you remember—" and he launched into details.

I listened with the most lively alarm. What the devil would he say next? All very well for Mary—and all very well for him. Neither of them seemed to see any harm in anything, but for the man in the street, like myself, who could neither ascend to her heights nor descend to his depths, it was an entirely different matter. Very reluctantly, I came to the conclusion that, however delightful mythology might have been in an ancient Greece, it was extremely embarrassing in a modern drawing-room.

There is, I fear, but little doubt that Penelope had done some few things that she ought not to have done. Who hasn't? She had immensely coquetted. She had not always kept the lordly wooers in their places. The fairy-man went further—much further. From what source he had obtained his information, I know not; but I hold it an unmanly occupation at any time to record feminine indiscretions, and more particularly so after the lapse of centuries, and in the presence of the lady's husband.

After his flight into scandalous biography, the fairy-man smiled drowsily at the fire.

"And Jack?" enquired my wife, dragging me into the limelight with reprehensible curiosity.

I could see that she positively thirsted to hear something about my mythological past that would keep pace with her own fabled irregularities. She was, thank Heaven, doomed to disappointment.

The fairy-man raised his head. He looked at me, indeed looked into me, and through me, as though I were plate-glass. If he can only see the wall at the other side, I thought, I am safe.

"He—" the biographer paused.

I waited anxiously.

"He is a very young soul, but full of promise, and, like the rest of us, a god in the making."

I breathed freely, and remarked that he had restored my hope.

"While there's death there's hope," he pronounced, with his singular smile.

"And Diana?" pursued Mary, rashly encouraging further revelations.

"Diana—" He murmured the name tenderly, as though he loved it, loved the very sounds that composed it.

A tremble passed over Diana. Hastily I plunged to the rescue.

"Diana was the huntress-goddess when I was a minor poet in Attica, or in Delos beloved by the nymphs."

But the fairy-man denied this. His manner was decisive, arresting. Reclining before the fire, he was staring up at the girl, and I saw that she could do no otherwise than stare down at him.

"Diana is not what she seems," he said, and paused long.

"Well?" I prompted with a nervous laugh.

"She is making her soul," continued the fairy-man in a curious voice (as though facts were being forced out of him), "but it has not been born yet. At birth there is always pain." He paused, then added dreamingly, as though visualising the remote past: "Her last life needed no soul—none whatever."

With all my might I wanted to contradict this preposterous statement, but could not, for words would not come. Someone, that was no more me than that fascinated girl sitting there was Diana, seemed fated to listen—to listen in an impotent silence that might possibly be taken for consent. It was maddening. And all the time, from the shadowy night beyond, there

came the murmur of many voices uttering spells, which I told myself indignantly was only the wind among the trees.

"She must realise herself first," continued the fairy-man. "Her spirit is bound upon the wheel of the past. It is struggling to get free. The high gods may help, or"—he again paused, then murmured just above his breath: "perhaps it will be love."

Love! At the word I breathed with freedom, with relief. Ah, surely that made her safe?

"We have met before. Do you remember me, Diana?"

He raised himself on his elbow as he asked the question, and gazed deep into her wide, fascinated eyes, his own full of strange laughter, a light irresistibly joyous, irresistibly alluring.

But Diana shook her head. She was resisting. I felt sure of it, and with all the power that was within me I willed her to succeed. But the dark face upturned to hers made all resistance vain. Even as I strove to influence her, I saw the dawn of helpless recognition within her eyes. It was coming—coming—

With a heated exclamation, I overthrew a small smoker's table that stood at my elbow. That broke the spell—thank God for that!

"Suppose you sing to us," I said brusquely, addressing our astonished guest. His good-nature stood the test, and, Mary adding her entreaties to mine, he rose and crossed the room to the piano.

With unruffled serenity, Mary smiled in his direction, and composed herself to listen with little movements of anticipatory pleasure.

The mental atmosphere has its waves as well as the physical. To my mind they had rocked around us, unexpressed and inexpressible. Slowly they were now subsiding, as the sea subsides after a storm. Diana was

recovering. That she was still agitated, I could feel, rather than see, but, as the moments passed, she became more composed.

It is strange now to reflect with what unaccountable swiftness all feelings of antagonism, or even of alarm, passed from the mind the moment our guest's attention was diverted into impersonal channels. I felt that myself, strongly; and in imputing a similar weakness to Diana, I do not think I err.

No sound met the ears, save the flicker of the fire. The fairy-man stood by the piano, looking fixedly down at the keyboard, and Mary, Diana, and I all watched him. An air of dreamy absorption in his face suggested unusual thoughtfulness. Of what was he thinking? Of having been thwarted in his pursuit of Diana? Of the hostility he had aroused in his host? Of his power to lure the little bird that had for the moment escaped? Or, simply, of his song? Heaven alone could tell. He was a mystery.

Suddenly, he threw up his head and laughed. Wheeling towards us, he cried: "I don't know why I'm here. I can't play."

His curious eyes rested on us with no shadow of resentment; with no suspicion of scheming; with nothing, in fact, but a jovial appreciation of the ridiculous position in which he found himself. "If this be acting," thought I, "I am in the presence of a master."

"Would you like someone to play your accompaniment?" suggested Mary. "Perhaps Diana—"

"No!"

My heart leapt. Turning abruptly, I faced Diana. Had that voice come from her?

"Diana, dear, are you not feeling well?" cried Mary.

The moment of silence that ensued seemed weighted with unendurable tension.

"She's only tired," I said hastily. "We won't ask

her to play again. Perhaps"—here I addressed her directly—"perhaps you would like to go to bed."

But beyond a shake of the head, Diana paid no heed to my suggestion. The appeal for assistance that I flashed to Mary proved equally unavailing.

"Can't you sing it without an accompaniment, fairy-man?" Mary questioned pleasantly.

"Yes, Penelope, that would be best of all," he agreed, and his eyes embraced her with a warm and shining light. "The song I'll sing needs no artificial accompaniment; and a piano is horribly artificial, isn't it?"

"No," said Mary, "I like a piano. I never think a drawing-room is complete without one."

"My song will feel strange in a drawing-room," continued the fairy-man. "It is at home on the hills, and in the woods, and its real accompaniment is the beat of the singer's heart, and the sough of the wandering wind."

"Really? Wandering wind! How interesting! Jack, d'you hear that?"

I grunted an affirmative.

"Now, do begin," encouraged the hostess; "I quite long for it."

"You shall hear it, Penelope; but you won't understand it, for its message is not for you. I stole it from a lovesick faun. I made it mine, for words that fit our feelings are as much ours as clothes that fit our bodies. It isn't a made-up song; it's just feeling—feeling aloud."

"Not too much feeling, please," I interposed hastily.

"Feeling depends on temperament, and also on age. I don't think you need be anxious. You have had your day and are nearing the twilight. But my song might have been inspired by the dawn of Diana." He turned to her—his voice softened. "Diana," he said, "you

have heard it before; perhaps you will remember it when you hear it again. I can see you listening, long ago, just released from sleep, timid and fearful. Your little bare feet are wet with dew, your limbs are cold with the dawn-wind, but your heart is on fire. There is still a little moonlight, and a silver mist, and a great stillness among the mountains. Love is awake. . . . I want you to hear it again, Diana, but not here, not in a house. Some day —"

"Aren't you going to sing it to us after all, fairy-man?" broke in Mary — she subsequently confided to me that her hasty interruption was prompted less by her fear that he might not sing than by her desire to put an end to this "extraordinary way of talking to our governess!"

"Yes, Penelope." Nothing abashed, the fairy-man smiled down at her. "But not in a room."

"Not in a room?"

"No, it needs space. But you are so kind that I cannot bear to disappoint you. I will sing it in the hall." He again turned to Diana. "Try and imagine that there is no room, no house, Diana. Try and imagine that there are not even any listeners — no one but you, here, and I, far up the mountain — waiting."

He was striding to the door, when Mary stopped him.

"Not too loud. Don't wake Pam."

He smiled — a very human smile. Ah, had he always smiled like that, he would have been the most lovable creature in the world!

"I'll just sing to her dreams," he said, and vanished.

I stole a glance at my companions. Mary was still smiling. In her mind the parting speech of the fairy-man had left a wake of happy thoughts. Tenderness to Pam is ever the royal road to Mary's heart. Diana's face I could not see — she had turned towards the door

—but from the rigidity of her pose I could tell that she was tensely expectant.

As for me, I resigned myself to listen in no enviable mood. Had it not been that I had no wish to make too much of an incident that might, after all, turn out to be trivial, I should have exercised my authority, and forbidden him to sing at all. The fact that I myself had, of my own free will, requested him to do so, added considerably to my ill-humour. His preamble to the song we were about to hear had aroused my anxiety to its highest pitch. So much so, indeed, that even the glamour of mythology, yes, even the fathering of the song upon a being so alluring as a lovesick faun, failed to elicit my enthusiasm.

Suddenly, as we sat there, each immersed in thought, a voice broke the silence—a baritone voice. In a flash, I knew that every one of my evil prognostications was about to be realised. That song of his was the most primitive thing imaginable: not only primitive, but passionate, naked, and, most assuredly, unashamed. It staggered me. It scandalised me. And yet, I confess, it moved me deeply.

How long I sat there drinking it in, I cannot tell. A sharp exclamation from Mary awoke me from my trance. Diana had risen from her chair; and, foot by foot, was moving slowly towards the door.

"Diana!" cried Mary.

But Diana did not stop. Drawn irresistibly forward, she appeared to be answering to the summons of the song. Dazed and impotent, I watched her with bated breath. Incontestably this was Diana, Gerald's future wife, the girl we had come to love, the girl I had vowed to protect—and yet, a strange, wild air haunted her about, which, as she moved, moved with her like an atmosphere.

Suddenly realising the significance of what I was

witnessing, I sprang forward. Reaching the door first, I effectually blocked the exit.

What I would have done had not Mary hurried to my aid, I can form no idea; but, thank Heaven, with the splendid promptitude and decision that characterises her every action she took entire charge of the situation.

"Leave her to me," she commanded, in a swift aside. "Take him downstairs."

That it was a moral victory on Mary's part could not be doubted. For a moment there was fierce resistance, and I, knowing Diana's extraordinary physical fitness, was prepared to assist — but no assistance was needed. The stronger will and the saner mind stood to win; and also, I like to think, the power of love, for there was in Mary, in her eyes, in her encircling arms, a promise of protection, a wealth of womanly compassion beautiful to witness.

Thinking it over afterwards, I came to doubt if Diana recognised either of us, for the wild spirit within her flamed this way and that, as though it were indeed a fire, and as if the song — that continued to pour inwards from the hall — were a breath from the unseen world.

Suddenly, however, she gave in, and suffered herself to be led away towards an inner door that communicated with Mary's bedroom.

It is a moot point how much music can express without words; but that a great deal can be conveyed, or suggested, through the medium of sound is a statement that will, I think, be contradicted by no one. Emotions that shrink from the exposure of articulate language, will, on occasions, express themselves in music with amazing, and even disconcerting, comprehensibility. The Venusberg of Wagner is a case in point.

Never, in all my life, had I heard, or even conceived,

any human singing comparable to the singing of the fairy-man. His power of making others feel was the most uncanny thing about him; and I, standing on the threshold, with every intention of executing the parting injunctions of Mary, was again held spellbound by the witchery of that sweet, that insidious, that terribly compelling voice. I insist upon the fact that the effort I eventually made to force him to cease was as painful as the distressing mental exertion necessary to break the spell of some tyrant dream. I succeeded at last, but it left me breathless, shaken, and quite ridiculously excited.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE offer of a drink lured the fairy-man downstairs. Providentially, he was in entire ignorance of the whirlpool of emotions he had aroused. A stiff whiskey-and-soda pulled me together. I might have foreseen that my extraordinary companion would prefer burgundy, but I could hardly have been expected to foretell that he would propose as a toast "the eternal serenity of the ladies."

Serenity! The irony bit deep. Much he cared for their eternal serenity, with his dark, handsome face, his dancing green eyes, and his voice that would have seduced an archangel. Unblushing assurance was my verdict; but no sooner had I pronounced it than I repented. No. If ever a being were utterly unconscious of having upset a respectable household, it was he. He seized my arm; he patted me affectionately; he laughed gaily into my face; he poured burgundy down his insatiable throat; he reiterated his joy at finding himself in my house, and in my society — in a word, he acted in such a manner that when, ten minutes later, I bade him "good-night" outside his bedroom door, I felt that the insidious and seductive charm of his amazing personality had penetrated to my very bones.

Upon my return to the drawing-room, I encountered Mary alone.

"How is she?" I asked anxiously.

"Thoroughly unnerved, poor child. Extraordinary. That song — it made me feel —"

"Feel!" I cried out at her. "By Jove! I don't want to feel like it again."

After which Mary questioned me, with a quite unusual deference to my opinion.

"There are more things in heaven and earth," I quoted uneasily.

And then we stood on the shadowy landing, listening, but not a sound came from the benighted house.

"Where is he?" asked Mary in a low voice.

I pointed to his bedroom door. "He's in there to the best of my belief, but I wouldn't be sure, for he doesn't feel like there."

Requested to explain, I went on:

"He feels to me all over the place — as much here as there, if you know what I mean. I could take my oath that he's looking at us now, and laughing — yes, laughing."

Mary glanced swiftly to left and right.

"Nonsense," she said with decision.

As a rule Mary is nothing if not convincing, but upon this occasion it struck me that she failed to convince me, because she had not succeeded in convincing herself. And, at that, a remote possibility came to me. Was she secretly nervous? I had known her to go downstairs in her dressing-gown, armed with nothing more than a poker, to look for a burglar. I had known her sleep in a haunted room, and label all mysterious noises "rats," in the face of the most incontrovertible psychical evidence. But, of course, this was different.

I looked at her searchingly. She was standing by my side, and appeared to be petrified, so absolutely was she without the least reassuring movement. The faint light from my candle showed me that she was staring into the shadowy house with what seemed to me a strained intensity of expression. "She *is* nervous," I decided and my heart melted with compassion. A woman who is nervous, and cannot say so without giving the

lie to goodness knows how many courageous speeches, makes far greater demands upon pity than a woman who has proclaimed herself a coward from the start.

I took her arm. I pressed it protectively.

"It's all right," I said.

She made no answer. And then I saw that she was gazing at the door of the fairy-man's bedroom.

"What is it?" I whispered.

"He'll find that bed very hard," murmured Mary.

CHAPTER XIX

It was Mary who broke the news to me.

"Jeanie says he simply won't answer," she protested, standing in the doorway of my bedroom, radiant, and fresh, and sweet-smelling as Venus newly risen from the sea.

"Tell her to knock again," I advised, checking the perilous activities of my razor.

"She has knocked again. His bath is turned on. He sleeps sounder than Pam. Jack! *Do* attend. You *must* come."

I think the fairy-man himself would have been amused had he seen his host gazing in perplexity into the unoccupied little room, his hostess peering with anxious eyes over her husband's shoulder, and Jeanie open-mouthed in the background.

"Ye gods of Homer!" I ejaculated.

As that included them all, there seemed no necessity to say more. The empty bed and the open window were quite capable of telling the tale unaided. But Mary, pushing me aside and advancing into the room with great courage, had considerably more to say.

"Oh!" she wailed, "look at the way he treats my best sheets!"

Hastily I joined her at the window. It framed a prospect wholly delectable. But it was not at that we stared, but at a sheet, one end fastened to a chest of drawers, the other dangling in space.

The situation appealing to the boy who lives eternal in every man, I chuckled. I had better have remained silent. When permitted to take an audible part in the

conversation, I endeavoured to convince Mary that a being so close to nature as our fairy-man would naturally prefer a bed under the stars to a bed under a roof. "Kitty," I illustrated, "is much happier out at grass than in the stable."

"But he might catch his death of cold — supposing it rained?"

"Mary," I sighed, "don't be so damping. Think of the romance."

That was foolish of me. I ought to have remembered that Mary associates romance with something to be enjoyed comfortably from the stalls, or to be devoured prematurely in a last chapter, and by no means with the discomforts attending a night spent under the stars. Moreover, as she conclusively pointed out, it would utterly ruin one's clothes.

"I sometimes think" — said I meditatively, sitting down on the edge of the bed so that I might the more conveniently address my auditor — "I sometimes think that we, in this artificial age, are inclined to overestimate the value of clothes."

Mary said nothing.

"I refuse to believe that Atalanta sprinted in petticoats."

But here a rush of little feet interrupted my lecture, and, as though my family were sworn to disprove all my pet theories, petticoated Pam hurled herself bodily into my arms. Observing her parents to be in mysterious occupation of the guest's room, her curiosity flamed high. I answered her shower of questions to the best of my ability.

"How lovely!" she sighed rapturously; then, with swift disappointment, "But why didn't he take me?"

This meeting with no parental encouragement, she burst forth: "Where is he now?"

"He may be—" I began, then gazed out of the window at the beautiful, sunlit world.

"Where, Daddy, where?" demanded my daughter, prancing with impatience.

"Practically anywhere."

"He's not. He's not anywhere practically. He's with the fairies. He's been dancing in the moonlight. He often does. He told me so. Life is too short to waste in sleep."

I smothered a laugh. This was pure plagiarism, and showed how strongly the revolutionary germs injected by the fairy-man had flourished in Pam's youthful breast.

"Fairies?" said Mary, raising her eyebrows.

"Of course fairies," asseverated Pam.

Mary opened her mouth.

"Don't say it, old thing," I implored.

Mary included her daughter and her husband in one look, then rose superior to her sex, and closed it again.

We gazed round the bedroom. Somehow, the fact that it had ceased to function as a bedroom imparted to it an air of peculiar mystery. It seemed to be inhabited only by an inaudible laugh.

"He shaves, Daddy," whispered Pam with awe.

"By Jove, so he does!"

Pam tiptoed to the dressing-table.

"Do you think that's what he puts on his hair?"

"Pam," came Mary's calm voice, "don't touch. Look, there's Diana waiting for you. And Jack, go and dress; you'll be late for breakfast."

"Punctuality is the last thing to expect in a well-ordered house," I observed, winking at Pam.

"Quite right, Daddy; who wants to be in time for anything?"

But here Mary drove us both before her into the passage.

I was, however, to be reminded of the episode, and that shortly, for, while dressing, I heard Pam's voice clearly distinct through two open doors.

"Oh, Diana, shall we dance in the moonlight too? When, Diana, when? Can you let yourself down by a sheet? — Don't tug, it hurts my hair. — Do you think our dear fairy-man would like to see me in my blue dress, or my white one? — I *am* holding my head still. — D'you love him, Diana? Your hands are shaking — Why? Daddy says — "

But, at this juncture, a closing door deprived me of the pleasure of hearing my words of wisdom quoted by Pam.

CHAPTER XX

I WAS strolling round the garden enjoying that best smoke of the day, the first after-breakfast pipe, when, all at once, the fairy-man hove in sight. There was something startling in the suddenness of his appearance. But a moment before I could have sworn the lawn lay empty of life—save for a blackbird so personal and vociferous that he might almost be said to have been yelling messages at me—and then, heigh, presto! there was the fairy-man halfway across it. Even the blackbird was astonished, for he broke off in the middle of a sentence.

I watched our guest as he approached. Was this the sun-god Apollo brushing the dew with his golden sandals? I am glad to be able to state, however, that no resemblance to any divinity, either ancient or modern, prevented my indulging my very natural curiosity as to where he had passed the night.

"Flirting with the nymphs," he chuckled. And, though this was more an answer to "how," than to "where," it left me taken aback, and in extreme doubt as to whether or no (in vulgar phrase) my leg was being pulled.

When he reached my side, he was still laughing, as though the mere memory of these reprehensible young persons had struck in him a note of quite irresistible jollity.

Resisting the insidious infection of his laugh, and, what, in my case, was even more insidious, the mythological flavour of his allusion, I tried to look at him with gravity. He was a sufficiently remarkable object.

His eyes matched the sunlit green of the woods behind him; his smile was whimsical, as whimsical as his humour; his skin, clear and sunbrowned, proclaimed perfect health. If nymphs there were upon our lonely hill, it might well be that this strange attractive creature had drawn them irresistibly from their hiding-places.

I suppose — after my experience of him in London — I ought to have been prepared for any eccentricity. Also, while talking to Mary, I had defended his nocturnal habits. But neither of these had predisposed me to accept of a guest, who had proved himself so little of a guest, without some sort of an explanation. Neither could I rid my mind of his unfortunate effect upon Diana — that song of his still seemed something in the air, troubling and imminent. So that it was with a not inconsiderable effort that I mastered myself sufficiently to say:

"Joking apart, you upset us very much. We couldn't make out what had become of you."

"Why?" he asked naïvely.

"Why? Well, it's pretty obvious, isn't it? When we found your bed unslept in — I say, what on earth made you go off like that?"

"I always do — unless it rains."

"What!"

"I always sleep out, whenever I can. No, I'm not mad. How all you dear people can stand sleeping all together in the same little stuffy box I can't imagine. No wonder you're unable to see them."

"Them?" I questioned. But there came no answer. His eyes had turned instinctively to the hill, now quivering through faint veils of heat. Looking at him with amazement, I noted little bits of heather still adhering to his blue-serge suit; and drops of dew, gleaming like diamond dust, upon his shoulders and hair. So one did he look at that moment with the freshness, the glamour,

and the gladness of early morning, that I unconsciously held my breath, and a feeling of sadness welled up in my heart, a sadness for which age and mortality alone were responsible.

Making another effort, and taking refuge this time in humour, I tried again:

"Look here," I remonstrated mildly, "we're a sort of house-party, though you don't seem to realise it. The occupation of beds may be optional, but other things are imperative — breakfast, for instance, daily, and at a fixed hour." I tried to impress him as I repeated — "at a fixed hour."

"Splendid!" he cried with the utmost approval; then with most delightful inconsequence, "I say, what's for breakfast?"

How could one impress, advise, or guide a guest like that? Besides, my own shortcomings rose up and reproached me. Who was I to — but, no! Always assume a virtue if you have it not. Meantime the fairy-man was awaiting my answer with an eagerness greatly out of proportion to the occasion.

"There was bacon — *hot* bacon," I said with severity.

"Was?" he echoed, in considerable dismay.

"There's some left." I reassured him, with a now irrepressible smile. His relief escaped in a sigh. Impulsively he linked his arm in mine. He chuckled.

"What I like about you," he assured me with the most engaging frankness, "is your unselfishness."

"No, no," I protested, quite in the dark, but distinctly flattered.

"It's a quality I admire, but never practice," he continued airily. "Now, if I'd been in your place — "

"Well?" I murmured, interested, for it was just possible that our positions might be reversed upon some future occasion.

"I'd have eaten all that bacon. I'd only have remembered you when I could only remember it."

I stared at him. Was he joking? No. There was a famished light in his green eyes. Even as I looked at him, he suddenly dropped my arm and ran from me hurriedly, and without apology.

"I say — stop!" I called after him, suddenly finding my voice.

He slowed down, apparently with reluctance.

"That sheet — you know?"

"Sheet?" He slowly came back. "What sheet?" Then, after a visible mental effort: "I remember now. Did I tear it?"

"No, not exactly. But it was one of our best sheets, and my wife says — "

"All right," he chuckled, "I'll take a blanket next time."

"And another thing," I continued hurriedly, for I was afraid he would bolt. But here I paused, for though I had thought it out carefully, yet, face to face with his bright inconsequence, my oft-rehearsed speech evaporated into thin air.

"Well?" he queried, good-naturedly trying to help me out.

"Would you mind if, for the future, we left music out of our programme?"

"Music?"

"Yes, songs."

"Songs? You mean — But — I was the only one who sang."

He was making it very difficult for me. I looked at him with perplexity. The thought of Diana, however, spurred me on.

"What was wrong with my song?" he demanded.

"Wrong? Oh, nothing exactly wrong. It was a remarkable song; but — "

He was waiting.

"You see" — I said plunging — "it was a little too — too — We were in the drawing-room. You take me?"

"No, I don't. What have songs got to do with a drawing-room?"

"Ah, that's just it!" cried I, delighted with the opening. "What *have* they to do with a drawing-room?"

"Why should they have?" he retorted. "A drawing-room isn't immortal."

I conceded the point.

"Love —" Breaking off, he caught swiftly at my expression, then flashed: "Of course it was love. What else could he want her for?"

"My dear boy," I soothed, laying a hand on his shoulder, much as one would calm a restive horse, "we've got to the root of the matter. Cupid is generally depicted clad in a couple of small wings. I fully sympathise. It strikes me as ideal. I'm all for classical simplicity, but in these degenerate days one must draw the line."

"You're always drawing lines."

"I'm not. Great Heavens, if it were only left to me — ! but, you see, it isn't, and we mustn't shock —"

He wrenched himself free. "Shock? Great Jupiter! who? Was it —?"

"Need we go into particulars?"

He fumed. He glared at me. He kicked a stone. Then he burst out:

"You want me to stop singing. Well, I can't. It's how they feel, you know; just sing."

"They? Who? What on earth are you talking about?"

But he never heard me. He was looking round him with that smile of his. His extraordinary eyes were

fixed now upon the woods immediately behind my back. He was listening. To what? A bird somewhere in the depths of lustrous leafage uttered a solitary trill, from the obscurity of the shadow-haunted glen came the hoarse water-music of the burn, subdued to a somnolent murmur, but to neither of these comprehensible sounds was my companion paying attention.

"What is it? I asked, instinctively lowering my voice.

He started, looked at me, laughed, and I recognised with relief that he was back in the material world.

"I want to please you," he said wistfully, and with gentle reproach. "I'm happy here. But you must be reasonable."

He broke off, thought for a moment, then, brightening:

"I'll tell you what I'll do, or rather won't do. I won't sing in your house again. It's like asking a road for something to eat. Eat? By Jupiter, that reminds me of bacon! I hope there's lots left."

I watched him skim over the dewy grass on his way to the house. I believe I shrugged my shoulders.

CHAPTER XXI

It must have been about an hour after the fairy-man had left me in quest of bacon that I heard the postman's horn. Looking towards the house, anticipating the usual exodus, I was astonished to see only Jeanie. I followed her.

I have hardly mentioned Jeanie before, which is ungrateful, for without her ministrations as house-tablemaid, life, as enjoyed by us, would be impossible. The reign of Jeanie dates far back into my past, in fact into my extreme youth. To her I am still "Master Jack," and will be so, I hope, until the end of the chapter. By her, Mary is referred to as "Master Jack's wife," a title, Jeanie thinks, of which any woman might well be proud. Pam is the very apple of her eye — though of which eye is doubtful, as, being afflicted with a squint, they do not see eye to eye with each other by any means.

As an old and valued friend, Jeanie is allowed a larger license than usually falls to the lot of house-tablemaids. To join artlessly in the conversation, to be chary of praise and lavish of blame, to safeguard our material interests with fierce and suspicious partisanship, and personally to conduct our progress from the Wicket Gate to the Celestial City, come to her as easily as laying the table for breakfast.

As I neared the gate, the postman was gazing into the recesses of his postbag with a sceptical expression.

"Ye needna pretend it isna there," said Jeanie scornfully.

"Bide a wee. You're not the only bodie that gets letters."

"Maybe no. But you're the only postman that brings them, worse luck."

The man would have retorted, but, catching sight of me, he muttered an abashed "Good-morning, Sir."

"There it is!" cried Jeanie, peeping and pointing. "That blue one. Come on with ye. Hand it over."

"It's no for you. Where's the young leddy?"

Where, indeed? We all three gazed in the direction of the house. No sign of Diana was visible. It was strange. Never before, to our knowledge, had Diana failed to meet Gerald's letter. And then — I laughed at myself. Making mountains out of molehills was no occupation for a would-be philosopher.

Turning to the postman, and interrupting a low-voiced interchange of personalities, I volunteered to deliver the letter.

On my way back to the house Jeanie overtook me. She had lingered behind to fire a parting shot, calculated to make the postman remember that he was only a man, and the satisfaction of one who has scored the last word still flushed her thin face.

Something was apparently on her mind, for her lips were pursed and her frown was portentous, but, being uncertain as to whether she was considering me or the top of a pine tree well to my left, I kept silent.

"It's no business of mine," she at last announced with characteristic abruptness.

Being entirely in the dark, I waited for enlightenment.

"And, mind ye, I defy anybody, whatever they may have again' me, to say I meddle with ither folks' affairs."

"So do I, Jeanie."

"Whit's that?"

"I defy them too."

"Hoots!" A long-suffering smile softened the aus-

terity of her mouth. "Ye will have yer jokes, Master Jack; but all the same I'm of opeenion ye ought to know."

Encouraged to impart anything that I ought to know, she continued:

"It's yon man. Aye, him ye call the fairy-man. Fairies indeed! A' rubbish. I wonder at the Mistress and you listenin' to him. It beats me."

"We can't very well help listening if he chooses to talk."

"That free!" swept on Jeanie, unheeding. "Speaks to a lassie as if he'd kenned her a' her life. Impidence! 'Jeanie,' says he, laughin' — 'I believe ye're a fairy — I believe I've met ye scamperin' aboot the hills wi' bare legs.' I nearly dropped the plates. Me! Bare legs! The leear! Hoo daur he? I'll learn him to misca' a decent, God-fearin', self-respectin' woman."

I stifled a laugh. It would have been brutal, for Jeanie's feelings had been genuinely outraged.

"And yet" — I coaxed — "there's something about him — something fascinating."

"Hump! He'll no fascinate me. The only thing I like about him is that ye havena got to make his bed."

I laughed aloud, and Jeanie condescended to grimace. It was unusually companionable.

"No that I would mind," she continued, thawing slightly, "if it wasna for the lassie — aye, Miss Diana. I canna just sit still and see a winsome young thing misled. Ah, that sobers ye!

"A face like a glint o' sunshine," she pursued, "and a way with her that makes ye love her in spite o' yerself. That obligin' too. And — in love — "

Her eyes softened — the severe lines about her mouth relaxed.

"An engaged lassie. There's a glamour aboot it that ye just canna deny. Me and the cook takes an aw-

ful interest. Ye mind her when ye first came back from London? That happy? Weel, she's different now."

I could not contradict her.

"And it's him. I misdoot sair that he's makin' love to her. Oh, I ken all aboot love, though I never wasted time on it masel'. Master Jack," — her voice sank — she edged closer, — "dinna trust him."

I kept silent.

"I'm bothered aboot her," continued Jeanie, speaking wistfully and with great simplicity; "I telt the Lord all aboot her last night. I'd gie a month's wages to see her happy. A lassie that's engaged to be married ought just to be a song of happiness. I'm puttin' ye on yer guard, Master Jack. It's ill I would like to see ony harm befall the lassie in this hoose. You watch them. She's no herself when he's by. It gives me the creeps. Ye've seen a wee birdie cowerin' doon among the leaves when a hawk sails overhead? Well, that's her. I dinna care if ye think it's ma business, or no. I had to tell ye. Oh, I ken I'm a paid servant — it's true, I will say it, ye canna stop me — but I mind when I was a bit lassie masel' — no that I was bonnie, but, och, I was fearful innocent! Aye, that easy took in. Ma word! I believed everything a man said. Aye, and if a lad wi' a face like his had come a coortin' of me, I'd have thought Heaven was openin'. Hoots! I ken fine what you would say — that it's no the same; and that she's engaged to be married, and I wasna — but, don't ye see, dearie, that only makes it worse. She's got to keep hersel' spotless for her lad, as weel as for hersel'. A lassie is just a flower in the garden of God — but flowers are that easily spoilt. Ye'll be amazed to hear me talk this way, auld Jeanie that's kenned ye in petticoats, and taught ye yer Catechism. But it's what I said, I just couldna sit still and dae naethin'."

Moving slowly side by side, we had reached the front

door, when suddenly the chime of the hall clock struck upon our ears. Jeanie started.

"Whit's that? Nine, ten, eleven. Ma word! Half the mornin' gone, and the breakfast no washed up!" —and without more ado, she hastened from me as quickly as her rheumatism would permit.

Encountering Mary in the hall, I learned that we were both seeking Diana.

"Pam's drill," explained Mary. "She's forgotten it. Extraordinary. She's always so punctual."

Entreated to look for her, I searched both house and garden. Not a trace. I wandered out into the road. I looked both up and down. It lay white, empty, and uncommunicative in the joyous sunshine. I turned my eyes towards the hills. But for once they failed me in a tight place. I even fell to inspecting the letter in my hand. Surely it ought to be able to lead me straight to Diana? Not a doubt but that it contained as much love as could be legally mailed for three ha'pence. As a guide to Diana's whereabouts, however, it proved useless. I was beginning to share Mary's anxiety when Providence sent the roadmender.

He had been to a neighbouring farm to fetch his supply of milk for the day, and was returning to his hut on the hill, carrying a microscopic can as gingerly as though it were full of molten gold.

"Have you seen a young lady?" I asked him anxiously.

Lowering the milk-can to the road, he subjected my face to a lengthy scrutiny.

Observing this, I supplied details. She was young, fair-haired, and probably without a hat.

"Is she biding with you?" he queried cautiously.

"She's my daughter's governess."

"Governess—" he made a tremendous mouthful of the word. "Aye, is that a fac'? Aye, aye."

"Well — have you seen her?"

At that he asked me with a suspicion of pawky humour how I would have him recognise a governess if he saw one.

"She doesn't look like a governess," I was forced to confess.

The confession amazed him — his mouth opened. I found myself inspecting a collection of stumps and fangs that would keep a dentist busy for a week.

"And what does she look like?" he demanded.

"She looks like — " I began. But no! I could not continue. I had a reputation for sanity to keep up. It would vanish into thin air if I breathed a word about the nymph.

He was waiting for my answer. I suppressed all signs of impatience.

"If you've seen any young lady at all, it must be her. I'll bet you sixpence there's not another within five miles at this moment."

"Ye'll no' find me bettin'," he said shortly. "I've mair sense."

I found him very Scotch. No man was ever more Scotch. His bodily frame was Scotch — his speech was Scotch — his non-committal attitude was tremendously Scotch. All honour to Scotland, but, it did not forward me in my quest. One thing, however, I realised. He was not to be coerced into the giving of information. He could be led, but never driven.

"How's the road?" I enquired genially.

"Fine," he answered laconically. His old face moved not a muscle, but for all that I could see that the attention flattered him.

"Look here," I said, "I'm anxious."

A gleam of rare sympathy came into his small, shrewd eyes.

"Aboot the lassie? Her that doesna look like a governess?"

I nodded.

"Well — ye can put yer mind at ease. I've seen them."

"Them?" I echoed, with a sudden sinking of the heart.

"Aye," he nodded energetically.

"A young man, was it? Dark? Good-looking?"

"He was a' that, and mair. Whit a smile on him! Ma worrd!"

In answer to my anxious interrogations, he informed me that he had seen the "bonnie pair" by the loch-side. "Courting," he phrased it. It put him in mind, he said, of Harry Lauder, as heard on his sister's gramophone — "Ye'll mind ma sister, her that's married on tae the butcher in Kilin?" "I kissed her once, and I asked her twice if she would be my bride," was the quotation he referred to. Did I know it? And his voice quavered out the air.

"Good-bye and thank you," I said, and ran from him.

I did not look back, but I could tell by my bones that he was standing where I had left him, open-mouthed, staring after me, speculating, no doubt, as to what my business could be with the governess who did not look like a governess.

CHAPTER XXII

In less than five minutes I had reached my objective, a miniature bay of yellow shingle, sheltered to landward by steep banks overhung by trees. A likely enough place, but they were not there. I was about to turn away disappointed, when I heard a laugh, Diana's laugh, the freshest, the most musical sound imaginable, and yet with something unfamiliar about it that caused both wonder and misgiving.

Crossing the tiny cove, my footsteps inaudible in the yielding sand, I looked over the rocky barrier.

There were the truants on a little wooded promontory, less than a dozen yards from where I stood concealed. Diana was seated on the grass, her back against a silver-birch. Her arms encircled her knees. Her face, upturned to that of her companion, glowed with animation. Her lips still retained the impression of laughter. The sun, penetrating the delicate and tremulous foliage, showered her with quivering lights and dancing shadows.

The fairy-man, his back against an adjacent tree, was looking down at her and talking. Beyond them gleamed the loch, reflecting the deep, unfathomable blue of the sky; while all around drowsed the woodlands — a sanctuary where birds sang, and wild bees hummed, and a great peace prevailed.

A picture, an idyllic picture — but Diana had forgotten Gerald!

Yes, her complete absorption in the fairy-man pointed to no other conclusion. Seen thus, mid trees, and grasses, and wild flowers, and checkered sunlight,

Diana's nymph-like qualities shone out. There was a strange, elusive air about her. I almost expected her to spring to her feet and disappear with a laugh — a laugh that would be an invitation to follow.

And the fairy-man? Surely he was endowed by the gods with every attraction calculated to win the heart of a maid, as certainly as though he had been despatched post-haste from Olympus for that very purpose. And how well he was succeeding! What golden and possibly flattering tale was even now flowing from his lips to cause Diana to raise her face to his so eagerly? By Heaven, she had the air of one anxious to miss no word!

My own attitude at this crisis left much to be desired. True it is that my first thought was loyal to Gerald. His letter in my hand, was I not in an intimate sense his ambassador? A mild indignation likewise possessed me. The fairy-man had not only succeeded in taking Diana's mind off her work, but (even more reprehensible), had beguiled her bodily from her professional domain, the school-room. Such, however, was the power of beauty, such the spell cast by the warm and scented woodlands, that for a moment I, too, fell a victim; my allegiance wavered, and, mounting my pet hobby-horse in post-haste, I galloped back across the centuries and beheld Apollo flaming for the love of Marpessa; Theseus beguiling the too trustful Ariadne; Paris, unmindful of the doom of Ilium, whispering his passion into the little ears of Helen.

I laugh at myself now — and no wonder. A respectable, middle-aged, married tax-payer! And Mary, like Sister Anne at the window, crying: "He cometh not." And Pam undrilled for twenty-four hours!

Diana it was who first caught sight of me. If I had had no previous apprehensions, they would have sprung

to life at the moment my eyes encountered hers. The light of pleased recognition, which I hoped, indeed believed, I had reason to expect, was absent. In its place was the dazed and wistful expression of one awakened suddenly from an enthralling dream.

All this was very instantaneous, for when the fairy-man spoke — as he did the moment he saw me — the little pucker about her brows smoothed itself out, and the glow returned as though a warm light had fallen on her from somewhere.

"Come and join us!" he cried, and beckoned.

"Don't let me disturb you," I smiled.

"We won't," he said, then very simply. "Take a tree."

And seeing how he and Diana were making use of the furniture of the forest, I followed their example.

"I was telling Diana about the Oreads," he explained.

"Oreads!" I ejaculated, and cast a glance right and left into the dim and dewy recesses beyond the diaphanous veils of sunlight.

"No end of them about here," he said lightly, "but I expect most of them are asleep just now. Can't burn the candle at both ends."

"You seem to do it," I said, looking at him with envying admiration.

"He was with them last night," murmured Diana, addressing no one in particular, then, still gazing up at him: "Tell it again, please."

He complied with her request, and I, listening, felt myself tossed hither and thither like a shuttle-cock between the battledores of credulity and unbelief.

During his night on the hill he had, while dozing in a little clump of pine trees, — a spot I knew well, for we often picnicked there, — beheld what he affirmed to have been a band of Oreads, five in number, two men

and three girls. They had danced, he averred, though it was their singing that had first revealed their proximity. I gathered that there had been sufficient moonlight, not only for him to see them as he lay under the pines, but also for him to jot down the air they sang in his notebook.

There you have his cock-and-bull story in a nutshell! As a fairy-tale for children its success would have been immediate, for children love details and the fairy-man omitted none. But Diana and I were not children; at least we were old enough to know better. But — did we? Diana didn't, I'll swear to that. She was drinking in with avidity every syllable that fell from his lips, with all a child's insatiable appetite for the marvellous. Most assuredly Diana could not be counted upon in the rally for common-sense.

And I? Well, I found myself staring at him with incredulity, with circumspection, very much on my guard. Oh, I know I ought to have been prepared for this sort of thing. My whole experience of him pointed directly to such a conclusion. But in spite of the name we had given him, in spite of his eccentricities, I confess I was taken aback. It was, I found, one thing to listen with smiling leniency to fairy-stories connected with his unknown past, but quite another thing to believe that fabulous beings had danced on the previous evening on our familiar hill, at the back of our own familiar house.

And here I must own to having harboured a suspicion — a suspicion that proved to have no foundation, and of which I am now ashamed. We all of us dislike being "taken in." It is not so much the fiction that offends as the feeling that the person who offers it imagines that we are fools enough to take it for truth. And if that objectionable possibility were not plainly visible in my eyes at the moment, it was only

because I was still doubtful, and shrank from hurting his feelings.

"How did you know they were Oreads?" I enquired, guardedly.

No sooner had I made this remark than I blushed for its futility. Not only did it concede the possibility of Oreads, but it even granted the ridiculous premise that he had seen them.

If I thought to catch the fairy-man out — which I believe now was my intention — I realised instantly that it was no easy task.

"Of course I knew they were Oreads," he laughed with jovial conviction; "I could no more mistake an Oread than you could a curate, or a jockey."

I found nothing to say. If he were mad, there was at all events method in his madness. The reason for his belief sounded extremely plausible. No one will deny that his profession does stamp a man. Still — a professional Oread —!

And at that some humorous little devil tickled me and I burst into laughter.

CHAPTER XXIII

A FLASH of indignant blue from Diana's eyes effectually killed that laugh. Before I could recover, she had besought the fairy-man to "sing it again."

"Great Cæsar!" I groaned inwardly, "another song!" But in view of the fact that he had only promised not to sing in the house, I could not in justice tax him with a broken word. Nor could I in my rôle of host churlishly pour cold water upon the imminent performance.

"What is the song?" I questioned, leaning against my tree with resignation. I was informed that it was the song of the Oreads, the song they danced to, and which, somehow or other, represented their mental attitude towards dancing. "Dance thoughts," was his expression. Considerably puzzled, outwardly attentive, inwardly sceptical, and yet at the same time undeniably interested, I applied myself to listen, firmly resolved to mount guard over my independence of judgment.

"He won't bamboozle me," I reflected, with premature complacency.

It might have been funny — he, standing there bareheaded, singing entirely without accompaniment, if one discounted the scarcely audible sigh from the branches, and the intermittent and melodious comments of the birds. But it wasn't funny. It was arresting, compelling, bewitching; curiously troubling, and unsettling to the imagination, to the heart, to the blood; haunting, too — oh, a score of adjectives! but not funny — no, not funny at all. I felt myself sliding, as a man might slide helplessly down a perilous incline.

It would be quite in order and in accordance with established precedents to dismiss that song as "indescribable"; certainly the easiest thing to do. But I cannot bring myself to do it. Like the Ancient Mariner, I feel impelled to put my feelings into words.

"In all our veins," wrote Stevenson, "there run some minims of the old wild, tree-top blood."

That is true. I know it. I felt it then.

My sensations as the song proceeded were of so complex, so bewildering, and so contradictory a nature that to record them with terseness and with clarity seems impossible. Queer things cropped up. I felt myself forgetting much — remembering more. I remember thinking: "If this is what Diana calls 'losing control,' it's a wonderful experience." I recollect, too, being attracted by him, and indignant with him at one and the same moment, a condition of mind that strikes me now as impossible. I find myself repeating the word "impossible." It describes the situation exactly.

It is whimsical, and humorous too, how a man's idiosyncrasies die hard — die, perhaps, last of all. Listening to him, Ulysses flashed quite unsummoned to my mind — Ulysses straining madly at the gyves that bound him to the mast, as over the grey unharvested sea stole the song of the sirens. "He too —" I thought with a sort of mazed wonder.

The song was agitating a veil. Would it lift? "Anything might happen," I thought breathlessly. Then, with a tremor: "Something *is* happening." I longed for the veil to be raised. I longed to know — to see. Oh, I *longed!* But only part of me, the winged part, the Psyche. Yes, it fluttered pale, ineffectual wings. For the other part, the grosser part that Shakespeare calls "the muddy vesture of decay," suddenly asserted itself, became top dog. For some little time I had been uncomfortably conscious of it clinging to, and concen-

trating upon, reassuring appearances — things, quite common things, whose material substantiality seemed beyond the shadow of a doubt — oh, trunks of trees, my own boots, and (I recall this with a smile) the vastly comforting and unassailable fact that this was Wednesday!

It was at this moment that Diana riveted my attention. The sight of her jerked me out of the maze of personal complications. She had become transfigured; there is no other word. Her face shone. Her eyes glowed. She had become more beautiful than ever. And yet there was something about her that caused my heart to stand still, something unfamiliar, uncanny, unlike the Diana that I had come to know so well.

She was gazing up into the face of the fairy-man with a rapt and ardent concentration that boded ill for the future, a fascinated state highly incorrect in a girl engaged to be married to another man.

Married! The word was like a talisman. It blew away the spell that had all but enmeshed me, as a fresh, morning breeze blows away the emanations of the night. In a moment I knew what I ought to do — and did it.

The song ceased as I presented Gerald's letter. Neither of us thanked the fairy-man, or indeed commented on the song in any way, and this was absolved from all appearance of incivility by the fact, plainly obvious, that the singer expected compliments as little as would a blackbird.

Diana took the letter from my hand mechanically. Dissembling my anxiety, I watched her closely. What effect would it have? Would it recall her to her true self? At first she seemed capable of letting it slip through her listless fingers unopened; but the writing — so characteristic of a strong and masterful nature — drew and pinned her attention like the grip of an

insistent hand. Its appeal must have been profound. Past all question that writing had been responsible for many an anticipatory thrill of joy, many a moment of happiness realised. Every letter of her name and address stood for the rose-dawn of a new and wonderful life — for something splendid and stable in the certainty of this man's devotion — for something deeply moving, the outward and visible sign of the love that bound him to her forever.

Even as she looked long at it, the expression in her eyes changed slowly. Almost was it as though I were privileged to gaze at the birth of a soul. A tenderness, a softness, a humanity descended upon her, and with them came the divine gift of tears. Flushing to the roots of her hair, she stared at us both as though we were strangers, unwelcome, embarrassing; yes, stared at us with her whole, quivering, remorseful soul in her brimming eyes; in a manner that made me, at all events, deeply ashamed of being a witness to her distress.

A moment she stood thus, then, with a sudden, impulsive movement, she sprang to her feet, and disappeared swiftly among the trees in the direction of the house.

CHAPTER XXIV

"So this is where you live?"

As Lady Desmond made this remark, she was standing a little way up the hill, while I, in my triple character of host and friend and showman, stood by her side.

Below us nestled our house in its nest of varied greenery. We could see the grey roofs, and the blue smoke rising perpendicularly from the chimneys. To the right, a long line of trees, starting from the loch and climbing far up the hill, told of our burn. Farther off, beyond the white road, lay Loch Voil in one of its dreamy moods, wherein the hills gazed at their calm reflection, and Narcissus-like, became enamoured of their own loveliness.

The diamond weather still held. A great sunlit peace brooded over the land. Wheeling through the radiant air with thin shrieks of delight were swallows, visiting their nests under the broad eaves. But they did not ruffle the peace; on the contrary, they gave it a more benign significance. Did not the haunting of our dwelling by these far voyagers, these glad and breathless spirits of speed, assure us that it had found favour in their sight, and that our grey, weather-beaten roof sheltered many another happy family besides our own?

"It's beautiful," murmured my companion. "It reminds me of Hyde Park."

I repressed a desire to laugh. Not only did she mean it, but she meant it as a compliment!

I studied her as she gazed with grateful patronage at the scenery. The face was not perfect: Heaven for-

bid! Its imperfections but endear it the more. Her eyes — but there! — what use to tell the secrets of eyes which read the secrets of others so unerringly? I think her soul must be very old, and very wise, though her body is still the incarnation of youth. Wisdom gazes from her eyes. Folly bubbles from her lips. Both are divine.

Yes, I found myself gazing at her with a smile — the smile was as much in humorous recognition of my own apparent inconsistency as in grateful acknowledgment of the daintiness of her appearance.

Why I — who had prayed for something appropriate to the Braes of Balquhidder, who had rejoiced over the advent of Diana — should have entreated Mary to invite Gamine to stay with us seems somewhat of a conundrum.

I believe that — apart from my very real affection and admiration for her — the solution lay in the fact that she was such a magnificent foil. Nothing could have been more seductively inappropriate to the surroundings. The slender ankles in their brown stockings; the shapely little feet in their new brogues, pretty as pictures; the coat, skirt, and hat of costly simplicity, presumably from the purlieus of Bond Street; all the exotic bloom, all the fragrant artificiality of her, but deepened by trenchancy of contrast the wild and rugged naturalness of woods and hills. It was a huge joke of a rather recondite nature, and that she was transparently unconscious of it but added to its humour.

Not that I would have the reader infer that Gamine's mental outfit is of a piece with her appearance. To give that impression would be to do her a grave injustice. Although she apparently carries the atmosphere of fashion and frivolity about with her as religiously as she carries her jewelled vanity-bag — although she

applies the standards of the West End as deftly as she applies her powder-puff — yet it is only a most forgivable little pose. Gamine is in reality wise, and not a little learned. But, as ashamed of her learning as others of their ignorance, she affects to despise it.

I ought to be familiar with her heart, for, like the head of Charles I in Mr. Dick's conversation, it crops up in season and out of season. But, is it her heart? No. I, for one, refuse to believe it, if only for the reason that it is worn invariably on her sleeve. Dimly, intuitively, hopefully, I feel that even as her real brain is a secret library, so her real heart is a secret temple.

But Gamine's effect on me is unfortunate. Confronted by frivolity, I, too, become frivolous. To follow her butterfly lead seems at the moment the only polite thing to do; for it would be extremely ungallant to flaunt the possession of qualities that Gamine, in her modesty, takes such pains to repudiate.

We seated ourselves on a hillock, she erect, I outstretched at her feet.

"And now that I've got you all to myself," she began; then, with a gleam through half-closed lashes: "Have I got you to myself, Jack?"

"For the moment," I returned, smiling, "you are privileged to share me with the heather and the bees."

"Then we'll proceed to wash our dirty linen in private — a horrid metaphor, Jack, that not even a washerwoman would use, for they're all ladies nowadays, but it must serve, though to quarrel with one's host does seem an inauspicious way of beginning a visit."

"It takes two to quarrel, Gamine, and how can I quarrel when I'm not even told what I must quarrel about?"

"We are quarrelling about —" She broke off; then swiftly: "Why didn't you meet me at the station?"

"It would have been a pleasure," said I thought-

fully. "A guest like you, Gamine, who flatters our scenery by comparing it to Hyde Park."

"And why," she demanded, "did you make me over to another man?"

"Self-denial — altruism — desire to benefit humanity."

She looked long at me. It is unbelievable what subtle shades of meaning her eyes can express.

"I hope you got on with him all right?" I asked, rather anxiously.

She was silent for a minute, then, suddenly, gave a little squeal of laughter. "I wish you'd seen us, Jack; we travelled in the same carriage all the way from London."

"It seems to have been amusing," said I, half turning on my back, to watch her animated face.

"Amusing! Listen. Just as we started, the guard poked his head in at our carriage window, grinned sympathetically, and promised to see that we weren't disturbed."

I chuckled. Gamine continued:

"To find himself suddenly locked in with an unofficial wife who could do nothing but try to suppress laughter — some situation, Jack! When I made demure advances, his 'Evening Standard' positively shook. Cowardly of him to hide, don't you think? I really don't know what would have happened if I hadn't read one of his luggage labels. But even that discovery — for of course I told him — didn't whitewash poor little me, though it prevented him bolting at the first halt."

She paused; absent-mindedly picked a piece of heather off my jacket; then murmured: "It's amazing how — well, how virginal some men are. It reconciles me to life. Of course he's a bachelor."

I assented.

"If ever he falls in love — it'll be like the rape of the Sabines."

"As many as that!"

She tapped me reprovingly with her sunshade. "Don't you see that's exactly what'll make it irresistible? The world will probably know nothing; but, mark my words, the woman will know much. . . . I diagnosed him while he slept," she added simply.

I groaned aloud, then remonstrated:

"I know that we're specialists on the affairs of the heart, Gamine, but I'm off duty here. Try not to talk shop."

"I liked him," continued Gamine dispassionately, "because he didn't care whether I liked him or not. I've learned to appreciate the genuine, even if it is only genuine disapprobation. He put me on my mettle, and yet he made me feel like a wave — mostly foam — splashing a rock. No self-respecting woman likes to be considered foam, Jack. Oh, he wasn't discourteous, just impassive. His silences were the most crushing things I've ever met. And the irritating thing was that I could see he had a lot in him. Steadfast, reliable, like a mountain. Metaphorically, you could go away for weeks and weeks and depend on him being there when you got back."

I made some comment, but she didn't even listen.

"A woman likes that. She likes to feel that wherever she went her old man-mountain would be there, at his post, delighted to welcome her home again. You know where you are then."

"Yes," I said dubiously, "you may know where you are, but he doesn't know where you've been. It's one-sided."

"My mountain would have only one side, Jack; my side," she explained earnestly. "I'm afraid to think what he thought of me, but I found him fearfully interesting."

I expected that remark. The man has yet to be born whom Gamine will find uninteresting. If she were fated to travel with the Devil (presumably masculine), she would label him "fearfully interesting"; and I am prepared to wager that, by the end of the journey, she would be in full possession of all the sorrows of Satan.

"And now," she said, "why didn't you tell me that *he* was here?"

My raised eyebrows did not deceive her. She continued:

"When I saw him in the garden, I got the surprise of my life. No one — at least, no woman — could forget him. His eyes are too wonderful. It was embarrassing, for I knew him, and he saw it, though he had no notion who I was. And then — well, something came over me, and I stood and stared speechless, like a silly, sentimental school-girl."

"And he?" I enquired with interest.

"He laughed — just laughed."

"And you laughed, too."

"How did you know that? It was extraordinary. And all your fault. If you'd only told me, I'd have been prepared."

I apologised — confessed that it had escaped my memory. "You see," I concluded gravely, "since we met there have been — well — happenings; exciting rather."

"Tell me, Jack."

When Gamine speaks like that, and smiles like that, I promptly lay most of my secrets face up on the table, and look on complacently while she inspects them. If Calypso was possessed of half the seductiveness of Gamine, I am not surprised that Ulysses forgot his glory — to say nothing of his wife — for seven years within her arms.

Of course I told her — I could not help myself. I

told her all about the fairy-man, my meeting with him in Piccadilly, our talk in Green Park, my invitation, his acceptance, his arrival, his powers of fascination. Allured by her air of deep sympathy, I even told her of Diana — something of Diana; not all, no, certainly not all.

"Fancy you being clever enough to get him here!" she cried, with a scarcely flattering amazement. "You're right. It is a fairy-tale. I've thought of him often — oh, not love's young dream, but just wondering if we'd diagnosed him right, and whether he'd found his Psyche. Now, Jack, quick!" She tapped me on the shoulder. "Who is he? Where does he come from? What's his name? Who are his people? Is this affair going to be exciting? I *am* glad I came."

With difficulty I stemmed the tide of questions. My inability to answer the majority of them caused my companion's eyes to seek the heavens. Her golden opinion of me became silver-gilt — if not, indeed, a less valuable metal. Her very kindness took on a gentle and compassionate tone that reminded me of Mary. I consider it very natural, and even excusable, that in vindication of my astuteness I was led into telling her several particulars which, perhaps, it might have been well to have left untold.

And Gamine listened — listened as if it were the most absorbing story she had ever heard. So speedily did I thaw under the fire of her eyes that I felt as proud as though I had invented not only the fairy-man but every one of the fairies myself. Of course I could see that Gamine was infinitely keener on the human side of the situation than on — what I might not inappropriately call — the superhuman. When I discoursed on fairies and fauns, and on the fairy-man's Prosperean power, a faint humorous, sceptical smile hovered round the corners of her mouth; but, when I touched upon

his mysterious influence over Diana, she became more wide-awake than a weasel.

"Go on. Tell me more," she said eagerly, laying an encouraging hand upon my arm.

I did so.

"It's wonderful!" she breathed — when, exercising considerable restraint, I managed to leave something still untold. "That man must have a past. I knew it. And she's engaged to be married?"

"Yes." I felt myself beaming. "His name's Gerald — Gerald Lindley — expects a rise in salary at any moment — worth it too. Shrewd sportsman, marked down a little house at Surbiton, near the railway, most convenient for — what on earth are you laughing at?"

But she would only laugh and laugh.

"Does she love him?" she enquired presently.

"Love him!" I stared at her. "She's *engaged* to him! He just fills her future."

"But not her present?"

"Present? Why — look here, Gamine, what are you getting at? Of course he fills her present. She just leans up against him — strong chap. Sort of face — no nonsense about it. Eyes that look right at you, and a mouth that knows its own business. Hullo! — am I being funny again?"

"Yes, Jack," she said meekly, "very funny. You ought to set up as a matrimonial agent."

"Might do worse," I growled, then joined in her laugh — there was no use doing anything else with Gamine.

"How d'you know when a girl's in love?" was her next preposterous question, propounded, too, with an amused smile.

"You want proofs," I said. "Well, you shall have them. She carries his picture about with her in a locket. She rushes to meet the postman every — "

"Well, why d'you stop?"

"Oh, nothing."

"*Does* she meet the postman every day?"

"She did — she will."

Gamine shook her head slowly. "She evidently missed a day. Why? Was she with him?"

Silence.

"Ah, I thought so. Jack, there's bound to be trouble."

Warmly I denied the possibility. Gamine smiled.

"You're a dear old thing; but as sentimental as they're made, and as blind as a bat. Pooh! Any woman could twist you round her little finger. And what's more, you'd better keep an eye on your governess. She's a silly little thing and doesn't seem to realise that she's playing with fire."

I listened to the speech, midway between a smile and a frown. That Gamine is three inches shorter than Diana accounted for the former. The opprobrious epithet "silly," for the latter.

"If I thought as you did," said I gravely, "I shouldn't have a moment's peace of mind. You don't seem to understand the situation at all. An engaged girl — "

Gamine had laughed compassionately.

"Dear old Jack, you're positively too sweet for words! You always were a duffer at diagnosing affairs of the heart. What used I to call you? — my sleeping partner?"

I growled a protest, but Gamine swept on:

"Can't you see? Lord, what a dense thing a man is! What *does* an engagement matter? What does anything matter, as long as the man on the spot appeals to her? Though you've tried to tell me as little as possible, I can see for myself that this fairy-man, as you call him, is a very real danger, and that the girl is just

the sort of foolish, romantic temperament to lose her head — and I can tell you from experience that, once the head is lost, the heart — "

"No," I interrupted with heat. "I refuse to believe it. You're all wrong. Diana's a splendid girl — better than that, she's a good girl, true as steel. You should just hear the way she talks of Gerald. There may be a little infatuation over this — this fairy-man; but it's nothing. It affects us all. It'll pass."

My companion looked at me in silence. That look disconcerted me. What was it I saw gleaming in the depths of her inscrutable eyes? Was it the wisdom of the serpent? Or was it only the wisdom of the woman?

Half an hour later we were returning slowly to the house, when she halted. Her expression — at once serious and self-reproachful — was that of a conscientious person who has omitted to perform a duty.

"Jack," she said, "we seem to have talked a great deal, but you've told me nothing about yourself."

Again I was cruising through perilous seas. Again the isle of Calypso hove in sight.

"Tell me," she said softly, and with every alluring symptom of profound personal interest, "tell me, Jack dear, have you fallen in love recently?"

I marvelled. Even the most astute of women can be singularly dense on one subject. Dense? It was an ailment. It was chronic. Thank goodness, it was not infectious. Yes, I marvelled. Here was Gamine. She knew Mary. And yet she could ask a question like that! Ah, well, it was not my part to enlighten her darkness. Rather was it mine to repay folly with folly.

"Let not thy right girl know what thy left girl doeth," I quoted gaily.

CHAPTER XXV

The Mountain — I find myself using Gamine's name for him quite as a matter of course — and I were strolling up and down the lawn in front of our house. The afternoon of the day upon which he and Gamine had shared a trap from the station was still with us. We were smoking. For my part, I was glad of the solace of tobacco. Right gladly would I have exchanged a few of the Mountain's austere virtues for one little convivial vice. But it could not be.

Mary having invited him, and he having accepted Mary's invitation, it was up to Mary's husband to see that he enjoyed himself. But, whether it was simply that I was unfortunate in my choice of subjects, or that the Mountain was constitutionally incapable of appreciating the peculiar charm of my society, the fact remains that for long I was rewarded by no leap of soul answering unto soul.

Gamine's experiences flashing to mind, I found that a fellow-feeling made me wondrous kind. She, too, had seen her airy conversational efforts — young and tender things that only wanted encouragement to grow up — bludgeoned by the awful silences of the Mountain. A phrase she had used returned to me. "Jack," she had said — and her tone testified to her amazement — "he wouldn't even discuss you!"

And then — happy chance — I hit upon a topic upon which this slightly embarrassing guest would condescend to exchange views. The only marvel was that I — fully conversant with his idiosyncrasies — had not thought of it before.

Curiously enough, the topic was suggested to me subconsciously by the Mountain himself. So impregnated is his brain with the deadly virus of golf, that, even in a drawing-room, his mind, if left to itself, reverts to the difficulties experienced by those who aspire to play in the correct manner. Watching him at such moments, you see his fingers mechanically treating a tea-spoon, or a paper-knife, or the poker, to what, I believe, is technically termed the "Vardon grip." If not interrupted, his hands move slowly upwards in beautiful unanimity in the direction of his right shoulder. An expression almost painful in its intensity steals over his face. But do not pity him. Corporeally, of course, he is still in your drawing-room; but the immortal soul of him is striding over fields Elysian, and, incidentally, is playing the game of its life.

"I'm sorry there isn't a golf-course near here," said I, dodging his walking-stick.

He paused in his practice, and, looking at me as a man with a job might look at one of the unemployed, suggested that I might make one.

I gazed with extreme doubt at the scenery.

"Driving from here," he continued, and gave a preliminary waggle; then, "Isn't there a level bit near the boat-house?"

I assented, adding that the enormous expenditure of balls necessary to reach a green guarded by a loch, a forest, a road, and a hay-field, would make the game exclusively the pastime of millionaires.

He frowned. His best friends could not credit the Mountain with physical beauty — a certain grandeur, perhaps, but of symmetry no sign. His shaggy eyebrows resemble pines upon a skyline, and, when he frowns, they remind one of a landslide.

"You must take your country as you find it," he objected.

"As long as you leave it as I would like to find it," I countered.

It was hardly the retort courteous, I admit; but, to tell the truth, I was slightly nettled at his parcelling my property into putting-greens. Not even with the aid of a disordered imagination could I see the enchanting wildness of my scenery tamed to make a Mountain holiday.

Ashamed of my irritability, I feigned an interest in his handicap.

"Used to be four," he informed me reminiscently.

Used to be? What on earth did he mean by that? Did he refer to the halcyon days when he was only a little Mountain?—a mere hillock, so to speak?

"And now?" I questioned.

"That" he said solemnly—and an amazing twinkle came into being—"that would be giving away the secrets of the handicapping committee."

I smiled outwardly, and it is just possible that he was smiling inwardly.

"You see," he went on—and I was conscious that the thermometer had risen from freezing to temperate—"I don't play."

I stared at him.

"I don't play," he repeated; "I practice. It's the theory that interests me."

"But," I asked in amazement, "will you *never* play again?"

"Yes—when—"

"When?"

"When I'm perfect."

A wonderful light shone in his blue eyes. Though personally unfamiliar with it, except on Sundays, I seemed to feel dimly, intuitively, that it was the light of a soul aspiring unto perfection. At that, all hopes of one day challenging him at golf departed. Even as

the sheep are divided from the goats, so are the small-handicap men from the large-handicap men. Besides, surely the Mountain was a being apart, a class by himself — a super-sheep — for him alone was reserved the Paradise of the perfect.

But unconscious of all he had lost, the Mountain, with awful concentration, was engaged in addressing a daisy. Four separate times — for I counted them — did he threaten it with the crook of his walking-stick. The wee, crimson-tipped flower remained unperturbed. I looked down at it with compassion. Suddenly, ferociously, bringing all his great body and all his great brain to bear upon the problem of its destruction, he smote. I take pleasure in recording that, though the daisy undeniably winced, it kept its head.

"I'm sorry neither Mary nor I could meet you at the station," was my next conversational venture, made in the hope that the mere mention of Mary would raise his spirits. He returned an absent-minded affirmative.

"I suppose you and Gamine introduced yourselves?" said I, repressing a wicked inclination to laugh.

Noting the hoist of his eyebrows, I explained that I called Lady Desmond "Gamine," because she was so unlike one.

Thinking this over, he apparently gave it up, for he informed me with an entire absence of expression that nothing approaching the nature of an introduction had taken place. I trusted that the surprise had been enjoyable.

"Surprise?" he ejaculated.

Upon which I pointed out that if to find a charming and unknown lady prepared to welcome him without the formality of an introduction were no surprise to him, then, all I could say was that he was an even luckier fellow than I thought.

He listened to this speech, watching me with fixed

eyes and without moving one facial muscle. I felt the genial and bantering smile fade from my lips. The silence that followed became oppressive. Standing within his moral shadow, so to speak, I fell to wondering if some happy, but remote, part of him ever faced the sunshine; some warm and kindly slope whereon a man might lie, and bask, and take his ease. I doubt it would have to be a woman. Mary does a good deal of basking, I believe. But when questioned by a deeply interested husband, Mary replies:

"Oh, I don't know."

"But how, when, and where do you like him?" I cry, all athirst for knowledge, and as full of zest as though I were playing a game.

After thought, and considerably bothered by being forced to visualise her feelings, Mary replies doubtfully that she supposes it is because he is so safe.

"Safe!" I ejaculate. "Safe?" I interrogate. "Ye gods! what an extraordinary thing to like a man for! How safe? When safe? Where safe? Safe from what?"

But to these pertinent questions I have never succeeded in obtaining a satisfactory reply.

"And, anyway, he's a bachelor," Mary let out on one occasion.

That, of course, wrote *finis* upon our duologue. In other words, I couldn't compete. But it didn't end there. No. I locked that cabalistic word in my heart, and took it out in secret to muse over its mysteries. Bachelor! The being I once was, the being I never shall be again. 'Tis a solemn thought. Bachelor! Trailing clouds of glory does he come. Even in the heart of a married woman — pure receptacle for virtues domestic — the word presses the electric button of emotion. The romance in it! The possibilities of it! Mary, now, — I shouldn't wonder if in her secret heart

she visualised the unmarried state of the Mountain as a subtle and holy compliment to herself. Not for the entire universe would I mention this to her. But there it is. And, apparently, it sheds a glamour over his every thought, word, and action, far removed from the grey light of common day in which I, for instance, lead my unromantic existence.

And did you observe that Gamine, too, though a widow, came near to leaping with joy when I mentioned that the Mountain was a bachelor? By Heavens, the word is a torch! It sets fire instanter to the carefully collected fuel piled upon every feminine altar of hope. Well, well, men have fought for freedom, so why not women for bachelors? Are they not, after all, synonymous terms?

CHAPTER XXVI

"You feel it, too," insisted the fairy-man.

He had joined the Mountain and me on the lawn at the close of the conversation recorded in the last chapter (if, indeed, anyone can be found flattering enough to call it conversation), and, as he made the remark, we were both watching Mary and the Mountain disappearing among the trees in the direction of our waterfall.

"Do I? Well, yes; I undoubtedly feel something," I admitted cautiously.

He was in a bad humour, a shocking humour. Now that Mary had personally removed the Mountain, I felt less anxious, but I was still suffering from the after-effects of strain.

And then — an extraordinary thing — as I looked long at him, and as he remained silent, over me there crept a distinct impression of change — the change insisted on by the fairy-man — I might go as far as to call it the absence of something. It grew and grew, until I felt convinced that something really had fled from the landscape that I loved.

The blackbird, who had been endeavouring to get into direct personal communication with me, had vanished. The glen had ceased to be magical. The clouds and the light were still running races up the mighty flanks of the hills, but it was just a habit — they didn't care who won. Even the wind was just the wind — a blustering fellow, rushing off to fill a vacuum, and no longer the living breath of God stealing down the gorges.

The wood had changed too. All at once its silence struck me as sad — sad as a deserted house, and eerie as a city whose inhabitants fear to show themselves.

It was, I suppose, the influence of my companion — thought-transference, perhaps, though, not being learned in such matters, I cannot say. I only know that I came to believe that I missed something, the infinite small stirrings and whisperings, the hovering of something on the verge of imminent visibility, the sense of mysterious but hidden companionship.

"Gone," whispered the fairy-man.

It was my inmost thought made audible, and it gave me a most uncanny sensation to hear it read out by this wizard by my side. Before I could speak, his bad humour surged back.

"Why on earth did you ask him here?" he denounced.

As the reader will bear witness, I had not asked him here. But, upon this occasion, Adam did not make his ungallant reference to "the woman Thou gavest me."

"He's spoilt it all," fumed our amazing guest, and his expression hovered midway between that of a petulant child and an indignant demigod. "We were all so happy, all getting on so nicely, but now — *now* —!" and his despairing gesture completed the sentence.

"We'll be happy again," I soothed, patting him on the shoulder, for the unhappy child seemed at that moment to get the better of the pagan deity.

"Never! Not close to the house. Not while he's here. How can we get into touch with them? We can't, I tell you. They've gone. We can't even see them any more."

I stroked my chin. My commonplace self, slightly suspicious, felt inclined to reply that it never could see them at the best of times; but, judging that the admission might prove depressing, it remained silent.

"They've all switched off," he groaned, "just like a person who has had enough of you at the other end of a 'phone."

"Look there!" he almost shouted, as he pointed passionately to the little wood that had ceased to be magical. "It's lonely. It's not the same. It's just a lot of trees and ferns. It's like a last year's nest. I wonder at you."

I remained staring at the wood. Of course I was sorry that it felt lonely, but I could not see that its loneliness was my fault. He wondered at me. Well, I wondered at myself. Was it compatible with my age or dignity to stand there meekly while an almost total stranger scolded me for having invited two old friends to my house? Surely not. I have got so involved with dual personalities in this story that I rather shrink from confessing that I suffered from the same complaint myself. Yes, I was certainly two men. At that moment one was outwardly apologetic, and the other was inwardly chuckling. And it was certainly the latter who was responsible for the remark that, had I foreseen what was going to happen, I should have requested him — like Royalty — to invite his own guests. And I made it with a secretly smiling conviction that a house-party collected by this extraordinary young man would have been as mad as the mad tea-party in "Alice in Wonderland."

It was, I think, that touch of the fantastic that appealed to my good-humour. My heart warmed to one so delightfully impossible. And then, too, he was so young, so apparently genuine, so devilish good-looking. Almost a boy compared to me. I like boys. If only Heaven in its infinite goodness — but there — everyone dreams of the unattainable.

That I caught him by the arm, that I talked to him like a father, possibly surprised him, but the sympathy

and affection I undoubtedly bore him induced him to listen to my admonitions with a patience entirely exemplary. I remember regretting that he had not treated the Mountain with politeness. "You needn't have said that about golf," I added. "Oh, I know how it must strike you; but we all have corns, and that ought to prevent us trampling on those of other people."

Catching his eye as I said this, an almost inconceivable thing took place — I found myself trying to explain corns to one who apparently knew nothing of them. It was only later that my recaptured sense of the absurd forced me to wonder ignobly how far my credulity had been exploited for his secret amusement.

At the time, however, I was as grave as a judge, and, by no means allowing his freedom from corns to depress me, I continued my discourse. Touching upon his fellow-guests, I drew his attention to the fact that although they did not possess qualities that attracted fairy-folk, yet they possessed others that commended them highly to their fellow-men. I finished up with: "He's a good chap — my wife says so. And, as for our other visitor, she is full of beautiful emotions — emotions that would enchant you, if only she permitted them to come to the surface."

I broke off this eulogy somewhat abruptly, for I was in two minds as to whether he had heard me or no. Something had evidently penetrated, for, suddenly, he cried:

"If we could only send him to sleep! He'd take his deadly atmosphere to bed with him. A really long sleep, like the Princess in the fairy-tale."

"Capital idea!" I applauded. "Most sensible. Hibernating would be nothing to it. He has no relations to ask awkward questions. Mary, of course, would regret it; but I doubt if her bridge could be worse. All

the same, I don't quite see the Mountain posing as 'The Sleeping Beauty,' do you?"

Thereupon, he advanced the theory that people's looks took a distinct turn for the better the moment they ceased to be themselves.

"If we only could believe that, it would be a consolation for some of us," I commented. "But there's another difficulty—" and I explained that, even did we succeed in sending the Mountain into an enchanted sleep, it would be necessary to find someone willing to kiss him, otherwise the chances were that he would sleep forever.

"We can easily get over that," he announced cheerfully. "Your wife—"

"No," I vetoed firmly.

He stared at me with incredulity.

"Not to oblige?"

"Not even to oblige."

He sighed. He shrugged his shoulders. He behaved like an extremely virtuous person who despaired of my morals. In fact, so unaccountable did he obviously consider me that I actually felt impelled to say something of a soothing and even exculpatory nature; and that this impluse came from without, and not from within, but added to my total inability to fathom it. Of course it was all supremely ridiculous, and the gravity with which we both visualised the wakefulness of the Mountain, and my excess of civilisation, must have made the gods shake with laughter.

"After all," I concluded, "it might be worse. He sleeps of his own accord. Like most of us—but not like you, you old night-bird!—he may be said to spend half his life asleep. Cheer up, you've always got the night."

He drew a long breath. I saw his curious eyes expand.

"And," I went on, "all this"—I waved my arm at the scenery—"all this won't change because a cloud passes over it. Life's full of joy."

"And love—!" he cried eagerly. "There's Diana."

CHAPTER XXVII

THERE is no doubt that Mary should have kept better guard over her unruly member — if one may be forgiven for designating a lady's tongue by so disrespectful an appellation. When she adjured her husband by all his gods to shun the very mention of fairies as he would the Devil, it behoved her — but there, I told her all along that they were bound to leak out.

It happened in this wise. Rustling into the drawing-room after dinner, and finding us all seated in semi-darkness, Mary very naturally turned to the youngest man present and asked him to light the lamp.

But no sooner had the word "fairy-man" passed her lips than, catching at her breath, she stared in mute consternation at the Mountain.

"Fairy!" he ejaculated, and it was for all the world as though a fox-terrier had enquired, "Who said rats?"

I suppressed a chuckle. It is so rarely that I catch Mary confused. Moreover, the recollection of my own snow-white innocence filled me with a holy, if somewhat self-righteous, joy.

"Yes," she faltered, turning a bright pink, and with a laugh — which I now unhesitatingly label "nervous," though informed later that I was never more mistaken in my life. "Yes," she continued, "that's our name for him."

"For whom?" enquired the Mountain.

"For him. For Mr. — Mr. — "

And then I saw that a terrible thing had happened. Mary had absolutely forgotten the real name of our

amazing guest! It was so unlike her to forget anything — for she generally remembers much more than has ever taken place — that I could scarcely believe my ears. There was every excuse for her, poor dear, for she had heard his name only once, and to my certain knowledge had never used it at all. Still, that didn't ease the situation. And what made matters infinitely worse was the fact that her husband — who was in duty bound to rush to her assistance — was as tongue-tied as herself.

I remember racking my brains, muttering inwardly: "Name? What the deuce *is* his name? This is awful. A host and hostess who forget the very names of their guests! Will anyone ever stay with us again?"

"Dangerfield," supplied the fairy-man, and so tickled was he with the whole incident that the fact that he had been requested to light the lamp passed entirely from his memory.

We both thanked him.

"But why *fairy-man?*" pursued the Mountain, tenacious as the terrier to which I have compared him.

"Oh, he sees them," said Gamine airily.

"Sees what?"

"Fairies, of course. I think it's a perfectly sweet idea."

"It's not an idea at all," said the fairy-man.

"Is it possible that anyone here believes in fairies?" demanded the Mountain with every symptom of incredulity.

This, as I could have told him, was the crux of the whole situation. Did anyone really believe? Anyone? There fell an awkward silence.

Little by little, on ghostly feet, night was invading the room. Its presence seemed to sap at the solid foundations of unbelief, as though every encroaching

shadow, passing from invisibility to visibility, were in itself an argument in defence of the unseen.

"I believe," said the voice of Diana. It was the solemn affirmation of a creed.

"But, if he assures us that he sees them—" began Mary.

"I don't really see why you should mind," broke in Gamine.

"The fairy belief," I quoted with much complacency, "is by no means confined to Celtic countries. Even the Eskimos—"

Gamine tittered.

"—And the North American Indians, believe in so-called supernatural beings. It seems to me that the 'Little People' of the Scottish hills, and the 'Leprechauns' of the Irish mountains have their counterpart in the 'Amatongo' of Africa, the 'Afreets' of Persia, the 'Isle' of Roumania, the—"

"Jack, how much longer—"

"I've just finished, my dear. I only wanted to remark that the belief originated in—"

"Bosh!"

I nearly jumped; and then, feeling considerably ruffled, stared at the shadow-haunted Mountain. Something serious had undoubtedly taken place in his interior, or he would not thus have forgotten his usually perfect manners. There came a muffled explosion.

"How anyone—anyone—any grown man or woman, can believe this—this—pitiable . . . children, of course, one can understand, but—"

"It makes the world more interesting," soothed I.

"You don't want interest—you want truth."

"What is truth?" murmured the mocking voice of Gamine.

"The sober evidence of our senses—" he began.

"Extremely contradictory and deceptive," I declared.

"The light of reason—" he vociferated.

"May be the darkness of ignorance," I denounced.

"Jack! Jack!" came Mary's warning voice.

"But—my dear—"

"I must be allowed to fight my own battles."

We all stared in the direction of the speaker. It was the first time the fairy-man had spoken on the subject. I settled myself more comfortably in my chair, well content to be a silent spectator. Whether I believed or not—and I defy anyone to find out—I looked forward with pleasure to the defence of fairies.

"Now, Mr. Vernon—" said the fairy-man, and the glow of imminent combat rang in his voice.

"Quite ready for you—" said the Mountain quietly.

Two duelists saluting each other before they were engaged.

"I do like a nice *friendly* argument," cried Mary with extreme anxiety.

"Fight it out!" cried Gamine.

I stared at the wraith from whom the exultant tones had proceeded, and distinctly saw the Roman Empire, the dust and blood of the arena, and Gamine clapping her little hands.

And they tried to fight it out—at least the Mountain did. He marshalled his arguments like troops, paraded them, deployed them, dug them in, dug them out, flung them over the top, and, in a word, employed all the military skill necessary for the accomplishment of victories. His arguments, too, were doughty, knock-you-down, stand-no-damned-nonsense fellows; full of courage, full of beef, full of common-sense. They knew that they were in the right. They marched straight on. They never looked back. If ever troops deserved victory, they did. And yet—I don't know—perhaps they didn't deserve victory after all, for they made the great mistake of despising their foe.

And the foe was not to be despised. Far from it! His utter indifference to dialectic tactics should have put the Mountain on his guard. The fairy-man absolutely flickered. He was here, there, and especially everywhere. There was neither pinning him down nor holding him up. His language, too, was exotic, or, more truthfully, fantastic, and quite unsuited to the taste of a Mountain situated in a temperate zone. Many times, when he ought to have been serious, he laughed — greatly, I could see, to the amazement and annoyance of the Mountain, who was sweating blood by the bucketful to bring about the destruction of the whole fairy brood. In him I delightedly recognised the whimsical creature who had kissed girls and sold violets in Piccadilly, the madcap philanthropist who had gravely informed me that he longed to people the hills with babies, and to send sanitary inspectors to the Devil.

The gloom deepened as the two men strove, fenced, and shifted ground, until, at last, barely conscious of their bodily presences, I came to think of them only as what they stood for — the faith of the few, and the unbelief of the many. The three women, too, became symbols of the conflicting opinions of humanity — the tense silence of Diana — the soothing and murmurous interruptions of Mary — the breathless and inflammatory plaudits of Gamine.

It ended — as indeed might have been foreseen — in a deadlock. At no time had the fairy-man taken it seriously. "What would have been the good of pointing out what he can't see?" was the way he expressed it later. From the first he anticipated no victory, even as he had expected no defeat. In school-boy phrase, he looked upon the whole thing as a "rag," and flung himself into it with characteristic gusto.

But the Mountain was constituted otherwise. To him it had been a matter of importance. Intolerance

(sincere conviction he would have called it) carried him away. That he had achieved no victory rankled in his honest breast. And there was something more. Beneath the outward appearance of profound disapproval, and even of antagonism—an appearance which, to do him justice, he vainly endeavoured to mask under a veneer of courtesy—I, for one, felt something different. I know not exactly what to call it. Suspicion, bewilderment, amazement? It partook of all three. But they were the effect, not the cause. I believe I might call it fascination. The possibility came to me in a flash, and nearly deprived me of breath. It seemed impossible that on him, too, should have fallen something of the spell that had affected us all. So preposterous and unexpected was the idea that I found myself chuckling quite involuntarily. I know I ought to have been ashamed of myself. I ought to have tried to imitate the impeccable conduct of Mary, who, actuated I am sure by the purest of pity, called suddenly for lights and a rubber of bridge.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A GREAT many books have been written about bridge, but very few of them have devoted even one short chapter to that species of the game termed "bumble-puppy" — the species that transgresses every known convention in the sanctity of the home, and in the warm, protecting bosom of the family. And yet, where can the study of character be more profitably pursued? Where is there a richer crop of humour? I promise any bridge player not only amusement, but instruction in human nature, were he or she to condescend to join our party in the rôle of one who looked on.

Although it was the first time that we four (Mary, Gamine, the Mountain, and I) had played together, there was no cutting for partners, no trusting to that fickle goddess Chance to provide each lady with a man. There was a beautiful simplicity in the choice of partners. Mary took the Mountain, and Gamine took me. That the Mountain and I might possibly become confederates was regarded with feminine distaste, equalled only by that which visualised the possibility of the ladies being forced to enter into partnership with each other. Not for her life would Mary own to her dread of being bewildered by play akin to her own — not to save her immortal soul would Gamine confess that she profoundly mistrusted the deductions of another woman. No. That was not their way. Mary said:

"Much nicer to have a man each, don't you think so, dear?"

And Gamine agreed with unaffected satisfaction.

I pitied the Mountain. To play with Mary was a

severe test to his time-honoured devotion. He was nothing if not earnest. You might think that each trick snatched from the adversaries was a year of perfect unmarried peace added to a lonely but well-regulated life. His eyes gazed undeviatingly at his cards — but one felt that all sorts of conflicting emotions were taking place behind that stolid, non-committal face.

Mary, on the contrary, was not in earnest. Not in the least! "Why make a fuss? It's only a game," she would cry, when convicted of wrong-doing. One brown eye, it is true, kept somewhere in the vicinity of the bridge-table, but the other, as likely as not, was busily occupied in taking useful hints from Gamine's dress.

The Mountain would sigh. I could see him trying to remember that Mary was dear to him — it is so difficult to feel actively loving towards a lady who invariably "goes to bed with an ace." He would stand it for quite a long time. At last, after some more than usually glaring atrocity, he would heave, he would lean forward, he would speak with gentleness, with firmness, with immense self-control, and he would say: "If I had been you, I would have covered that honour."

Had he been she! The gods must have laughed consumedly to hear him. They knew, but he did not, that, had he been she, he would, at that identical moment, have been inside Gamine's evening frock, examining himself in the mirror with every sign of feminine satisfaction.

And Mary — as indifferent to honours as was Diogenes — would smile sweetly upon him, and say: "Would you? Ought I? You must tell me all about it afterwards. Gamine, where did you say you got — "

And off we would go again, more unconventionally than ever.

As for Gamine and me, our partnership was not without its exciting moments. Personally, I find brilliance

unaccompanied by judgment too dazzling to be pleasant. Also, I admire placidity. When my partner redoubles on the strength of two or three little things I may have said, and we promptly go down a few hundreds, why shrug gleaming shoulders? To err is human. Besides, I had many more important things to think about.

Diana and the fairy-man, not being players, occupied not only the rest of the room, but also the greater part of my attention. I was seated with my back to them, it is true, but on the wall in front of me was a mirror in which I could see them quite plainly when I raised my eyes. How could I be expected to be sound in my declarations or masterly in my play, with that picture continually before me? Every time my attention wandered from my cards to that cursed mirror, I saw Diana's double in a low chair near the fire and the fairy-man's double bending over her. Only now and then were some fragments of their conversation allowed to reach me, for Gamine is extremely sprightly while playing bridge, and Mary has a way of murmuring monologues in which she imparts information to all whom it may not concern. The little I managed to hear, however, quite destroyed my peace of mind, for there was something in their sudden intimacy that gave me food for uneasy speculation.

You would think that the wife of my bosom would have shared my anxieties. But no; utterly oblivious of her husband's discomposure, Mary sat, facing the Mountain, smiling placidly upon the company in general.

"Your deal," suggested the Mountain to her, in a voice that breathed of immense reservoirs of patience.

It took a considerable time to convince Mary — it always does; for, though quite willing to believe, she likes to have things explained, and the explanation, in-

volving other explanations, sometimes leads one far away from the original subject. Her dealing, however, after she was convinced that the deal was hers, was unusually faultless — in fact, it partook more of a card-trick than anything else, and the Mountain and I felt both astonished and pleased when — talking continuously to Gamine — she finally succeeded in dealing the last card to herself.

I was trying to arrange my hand, when the fairy-man's voice, tuned to a most seductive pitch, came to my ears.

"You remember, Diana?"

Remember? What on earth did he expect her to remember? Then, his theory of having met her in a previous existence flashing to my mind, I remained spellbound, my eyes on the mirror, my ears on the alert. Diana's face was raised to his. I had difficulty in even recognising the girl of the distressful confidences in the transfigured being who responded to the summons of a mysterious recollection. How can I describe it? There was about her an attitude of abandonment, of charmed surrender. For the moment at all events, there was an entire lifting of the clouds that had oppressed her. Her restlessness, even, had subsided. All memories of sorrows, of responsibilities, of earthly ties had vanished. Her nature, tuning itself to his, answered to the finest vibrations. Not only that, but, rising as though on beating wings, it gave out clear harmonies that reflected a joy I never could know. Thus much I could see — or thought I saw — but the why and the wherefore shrouded themselves in a region of pure conjecture.

Suddenly, there fell on me an immense helplessness, a feeling of infinite remoteness. Diana seemed to be passing beyond recall. When this strange mood was on her, she, like the fairy-man, was with us, but not

of us. His influence was luring her away. It was creating a charmed circle, within which we denizens of the material earth were unable to enter. They were as much alone, these two, in their swift intimacy, in their laughter, in their joy, as though we four bridge players had ceased to exist — as though the house itself had ceased to exist — as though they stood alone, passionately conscious of the nearness of each other's presence, under the remote and passionless stars.

Is it to be wondered at if my anxiety increased? And yet, so closely interwoven are the threads of tragedy and comedy in this loom of life, that, even while my mind was racked with doubts and fears, I was forced to listen with feigned interest to the Mountain reminding Mary for the third time that it was "up to her."

"A spade," hazarded Mary, with extreme doubt.

"Two diamonds," said Gamine, with customary briskness.

"Two spades," said the Mountain, with ponderous decision.

"How wonderful after all these years!" came the voice of the fairy-man.

Gamine tittered, and flashed a look over her shoulder. I upset an ash-tray.

"Up to you," said someone.

Mentally jerking myself back to the bridge-table, I found that I had been addressed by the Mountain. Upon my asking what anyone had gone, I observed the bushy eyebrows of my interlocutor nearly to reach his hair. Hastily I went three diamonds.

"Oh, dear, I wish I knew what to do," moaned Mary. "If I could only ask someone."

The Mountain sighed.

"You needn't sigh," continued Mary, with slight asperity. "I know you've told me often, but I've never

held a hand like this before. Of course there is some silly rule, but I've forgotten it."

The Mountain leant back in his chair, and gazed at the ceiling.

Mary began counting feverishly on her fingers.

"Is it really fate?" murmured the wondering voice of Diana, clearly distinct in the hush of the room.

"Someone ought to do something," said Gamine under her breath.

"I know, I know," sighed Mary. "Well, then, three spades. You'll be cross, Harry, but it can't be helped."

Both Gamine and the Mountain passed.

"Five diamonds," I plunged.

This even Mary passed. Gamine followed her example.

"Double," said the Mountain.

"Content," I breathed. Never had I spoken a truer word. If it stood at five diamonds, Gamine would have to play the hand; I would be dummy; and could then fling myself bodily into the breach for five useful, perhaps indispensable, minutes.

It was now up to Mary. She looked long at her hand — she hesitated.

"Say it," I implored.

There came a stir from behind me — a chair being shoved back.

"Where are you two going?" asked Mary, looking up.

"Into the moonlight," came the voice of the fairy-man.

Mary smilingly approved, at the same time recommending Diana to throw a shawl over her shoulders, as the nights had turned chilly.

"What's the matter?" asked Gamine, looking at me.

"Nothing," I said shortly — then, in an agonised aside to Mary, "Don't let her go!"

"What are you going to say?" enquired the Mountain of his partner.

"Say? I do wish you wouldn't all fluster me; I don't see why I should say anything, though Jack wants —"

"Are you content?"

"Of course I'm content, but he isn't. Why shouldn't I be content? I'm sure there's no harm —"

"Then we play to five diamonds."

"Thank goodness! that's settled," I ejaculated, and laid my cards hastily on the table.

"What have you done?" wailed Gamine.

But ere the tale of my weakness could be related, I had started in pursuit.

CHAPTER XXIX

When I returned to the house, I found the Mountain in my study. He was seated in one of the armchairs by the fire, reading by the light of my little green lamp. Catching sight of decanters and their accessories, I poured myself out a whiskey-and-soda. It was not until the first long draught was well down my throat that I recalled my guest. As a matter of fact, it was his glance, levelled at me over the top of his tortoise-shell spectacles, that jogged my memory. In that glance I read his opinion of a host who indulges in solitary drinking.

"Have a nip?" I invited hastily.

He declined. I finished my drink, enquired if the ladies had gone to bed, and was informed that they had, after which we relapsed into silence, he returning to his book, I to my thoughts.

I saw again, in anxious retrospect, a moonlit glade and two figures slowly traversing it side by side. I saw, too, the exact spot at which a breathless and middle-aged gentleman had overtaken them. "It's a dreadful business," I growled to myself. The Mountain looked up, I knew then that I had spoken aloud.

"I'm sorry," I said, for by his expression I imagined that he resented the interruption.

"Your apologies," he said with ominous compression, "are due more to the ladies than to me."

Apologies? Of course. He referred to that wretched rubber. Well, he was right. I had put myself in the wrong. A more defaulting dummy never laid down his

cards. I had fled into the night with fear, and, more especially, with reproach. It was my duty to eat humble pie. I did so, adding:

"By the way, did you pull off that double?"

"You went down five hundred," he informed me, not without triumph. Then, his mind obviously reverting to my conduct: "But the ladies — "

"That'll be all right," I said hastily. "You see, to a certain extent, they understand — "

The Mountain waited.

" — The — the unusual situation."

He stared at me for a minute with slightly raised eyebrows, then, finding that I said no more, he breathed a vague "Ah," and returned to his book.

"But I got them all right," I blurted suddenly, yielding to an uncontrollable longing for sympathy. "It's a devilish responsibility."

My companion said nothing, but, as he had taken off his spectacles and was cleaning them thoughtfully with a silk handkerchief, I received the comforting assurance that he was listening.

I considered him wistfully. There is something so solid and stable in his appearance that I felt that there must of necessity be something equally solid and stable in his judgments. Had he ever been a boy? Had he ever stolen apples from a neighbour's tree, or kisses from a neighbour's girl? I doubted it still more. Other men have done these foolish things, and reaped tummy-aches and heartaches, but not the Mountain. Every move on the chessboard of his life had, I felt certain, been lengthily pondered, before being put into action. "What an invaluable mentor!" was my secret thought. And here was I, far more urgently in need of a wise mentor than was ever the youthful Telemachus. But the affair, to be crowned with success, must be managed with circumspection. It must be approached as though

it were not being approached. Mary could do it — but could I?

"Where is the young lady now?" enquired the Mountain.

I answered with alacrity that, to the best of my belief, she was in her bed. His grave nod signified approval.

"As for him," I continued, "he's gone; — no, not for good, only for the night."

I almost smiled; it was something to have astonished a Mountain.

"Yes," I went on, "he hates beds — believes in bracken. Extraordinary, isn't it? But that's his way" — and I related the episode of the pendent sheet.

"And where do you think he is now?" he asked, when I had finished.

"Now? Goodness only knows! He may be halfway up our hill, or in the heart of the pine-wood."

"Have you known him long?" was his next question. I told him. A pinch of tobacco remained suspended halfway to his pipe.

"What!" he ejaculated. "You saw him only *once* before asking him here!"

"Twice."

"Same thing."

"I know, but — I liked him. I like him still."

"All very well, but — this evening — " he paused.

"This evening? That was different. Something drastic had to be done."

"To interrupt?"

"Precisely."

He struck a match, then murmured: "I see."

After he had lighted his pipe, he favoured me with a look, and I saw that I had climbed one rung up the thousand-rung ladder that leads to his good graces. It gave me a most unusual and exhilarating sensation.

"Not a good influence," he summarised, between puffs.

"I wouldn't say that," I said hastily. "You know what it is—youth goes to youth—very natural, really."

"And yet, you—"

"I know. That's what worries me. All imagination, perhaps. I'd like"—here I hesitated, then, assuming a studiously impersonal tone—"I'd like another opinion—the opinion of some sensible person; not too young; of my own sex, for choice. It would relieve me very much."

"Ah!"

"But, of course"—I waved my hand—"it's out of the question."

"I don't see that," he said argumentatively.

"Don't you? It's because it's a matter of great delicacy; too delicate to discuss at all—in detail, I mean—except, of course, from his side of it—how it would strike two old boys, thorough men of the world, and all that sort of thing."

From the sound that escaped his closed lips, I saw that he was cautiously smelling the bait.

"You see," I went on, leaning forward, and with a nearer approach to speaking confidentially than I had ever imagined possible, "I'm not matter-of-fact enough. I want someone to steady me: otherwise, well—my imagination—You take me?"

He did. Not only did he take me, but the astounding thing was he took me pleasantly! I returned his smile with cordiality; then, feeling that an occasion so exceptional merited some sort of celebration, I again invited him to drink.

"I think I'm beginning to see your point," he said with heavy deliberation, as he carefully set down his half-empty glass.

I assured him earnestly that I was glad to hear it.

"Though, mind you," he continued, "I cannot lay claim to—to unusual common-sense. But if I—ahem! —any assistance—very pleased—very pleased indeed."

My heartfelt thanks disconcerted him greatly. It needed all my tact to convince him that the course of action upon which we were about to embark was entirely impersonal in its nature, and that, should he do me the favour, I would in future keep my gratitude to myself. After a few non-committal remarks, he assured me with the utmost solemnity that his experience in "delicate affairs" was practically nil.

After this we conversed almost at our ease. Always terse, my companion—under the influence of emotion —became cryptic, so that, in several instances, I was forced to grope for his meaning, and—such is the force of example—I too became unusually sparing of words. I know not how we managed to impart, each to the other, our mutually shared, deeply felt, and all but silent conviction that Diana's name should be left out of our deliberations. That we arrived at this decision, however, is incontestable. I believe now that this understanding alone induced him to accept the post of adviser-in-chief at the court of common-sense.

For all our reticence, Diana was ever present. Inexpressibly sweet, sweet as a wandering garden-scent, she haunted our unspoken thoughts. But, for all the verbal attention we paid her, she might have been relegated to the viewless air.

For the fairy-man, however, we entertained—at least at first—no such delicate scruples.

"What d'you think of him?" I asked.

"He *can* talk," grunted the Mountain, after an interval spent, I am convinced, in trying to find something favourable to say.

"Can't he!" I agreed with enthusiasm. "That argu-

ment you had — inconclusive, of course. You couldn't possibly be expected to know, but you rather trod on his corns. You see, fairies are his hobby — I might almost say his profession."

"Good Lord!"

He finished his drink as though he had need of it.

"Is he" — there was an anxious gleam in his eye — "is he all right?"

I repeated his question dubiously.

"Normal?" he enlarged — "sane?"

"I — I don't know. He's what they call psychic."

"As bad as that," I heard him murmur.

"As far as I can see," I reassured him, "it does no one any harm — or hasn't, up till now. We just let him say he sees things. As a matter of fact, even if we objected, I don't see how we could possibly prevent it, do you?"

He was forced, somewhat reluctantly, to admit that my conclusions were incontrovertible.

"He just plays about," I continued more cheerfully. "He fits in. He — what I call — harmonises. And we all love him."

"All?" he cocked his old eye meaningly.

"That," I pointed out to him, with a meaning as deep as his own, "is where the benefit of your advice comes in. Have another drink."

We pledged each other a little absent-mindedly, and then the Mountain requested me, with his usual laborious politeness, to pass the matches.

"The question is" — I began, as, his pipe in full blast, he disposed himself to listen — "the question is — is he to be trusted?"

"Ah," he breathed heavily, then, after thought: "You mean with —"

"Exactly."

We smoked over this for two minutes.

"Well?" I prompted anxiously.

"Don't know," he said. "You" (puff) "seen him more than I have" (puff, puff). "As for me — hardly fair — judge" (puff). "Still, can't be too careful. What sort of chap is he? I mean, what are his views — other subjects?" (Puff, puff, puff.)

"Views?" I shook my head; "oh, unorthodox, very. Scoffs at marriage, though devoted to children. Confesses to — ah — going round living, loving, and — leaving, I think it was."

The Mountain's face had grown sterner.

"Scoffs at — Ah, that's bad. Loving and — ah! — leaving? That's enough. Don't tell me any more. Don't want to hear it. Made up my mind."

I knew more was coming. At last it came.

"My advice is that you and your wife" — he paused, substituted "Mary," then finished — "must be on your guard."

This, I thought, was very cleverly worded.

"We are watching events," I assured him earnestly.

My companion's nod expressed approval weighted with extreme gravity. He evidently was of opinion that it was absolutely necessary to "watch events."

After this we conversed for a short time upon matters of general interest, but the Mountain was clearly absent-minded. Something troubled him. I read it in his eye, for it is an eye that, when it speaks at all, always speaks the truth. He contradicted himself twice about the correct manner of playing an approach shot — which, as everyone who knows the Mountain is aware, was a very grave symptom indeed — then stared at me. I knew then that it was very near.

"I hate to see people taken in," he blurted suddenly — "ladies especially. And as for those who take them in — I — I — "

"We can't all think alike," I interrupted hastily.

"A good job too."

"It takes all sorts to make a world," I quoted philosophically.

I understood the Mountain to grunt that some of the sorts would be much better put out of the way, and that anyone who undertook their removal would have his sympathy.

"All this," he concluded, "must be damned unpleasant for you."

He spoke with warm commiseration, as though he were referring to an epidemic of scarlet-fever.

"*You* don't believe this tommy-rot about — about fairies?" he growled, shooting at me point-blank.

"I — I haven't seen any," I countered, my back against the wall.

"Of course you haven't." He laughed scornfully. "And neither has anyone else. Faugh!"

To my relief my prevarication had saved me for the moment, though it by no means increased my self-respect.

We smoked for a little time in comparative silence. Twice the Mountain grunted indignantly at the fire. I knew well of what he was thinking. As for me, I felt sad. Had I sold my fairy-birthright for a mess of Mountainous flattery? Would the realms of Oberon and Titania be forevermore a *terra incognita* to me? Then, the magnetic charm of the fairy-man flushing over me, I mentioned it to my companion.

"You felt it too," I added.

It was a nauseous draught for the Mountain to confess that I had spoken the truth; but he swallowed in a manner that inspired respect.

"It's joyous," I continued reminiscently. "Magnetic, I think. Creates an atmosphere."

"I don't like it. It's unhealthy."

I expressed surprise. If there was one thing which,

to my mind, it did generate, it was precisely the quality the Mountain had denied to it.

"Not manly. No reticence," he growled.

"You can't expect—"

"I do. I do expect it. A man who loses reticence, loses self-respect. Look at the way he goes on. Good thing he isn't a friend—"

"He's my guest."

We stared at each other, and read something akin to consternation in each other's eyes. I believe we had both forgotten the fact. Mine, of course, was the greater blame.

"Let's leave him out of our conversation," I said hurriedly.

He acquiesced with visible relief.

CHAPTER XXX

"LET'S go and look for fairies," I suggested eagerly.

Pam — whose half-holiday it was — looked at me with youthful scepticism.

"It all depends where we go," I continued persuasively. "Would you be content to-day with a water-fairy? or do you demand a mountain-fairy? or, as the weather is rather warm, would you put up with a common or garden fairy? It's up to you, my dear. You pays your money, and takes your choice."

Pam sighed.

"Poor Daddy!" she said softly.

I felt my brow wrinkling. What had I done, or left undone, to earn me the compassion of my only daughter? I was soon to find out.

"You've never even seen a fairy, Daddy."

My mouth opened hastily to allow the passage of a hot contradiction, but the goddess of Truth closed it at once.

"We go out," continued Pam sadly. "We get very tired; we look, and look, and look — oh, *everywhere!* —and we never see even the teeniest little elf!"

"That's because the teeniest ones are too teeny to be seen," I explained earnestly.

Pam shook her head. She has all a child's unerring and unsparing instinct for the fallacious argument.

"We never see anything," she insisted.

"But," I pleaded, "we might, you know, any day. The fairies are just testing us. They come very close, sometimes they even sit on your knee, but they won't show themselves, unless they are jolly well certain you

are the right sort of chap — I mean girl. You mustn't doubt them, Pam."

"It isn't them I doubt; it's you."

"*Me!* Great Cæsar! Why?"

"You are always talking about them. And you never see them."

"But — but — this is terrible. You don't understand. It's not what you see that matters. Don't think it! It's the fairy-thoughts — the fairy-spirit. Besides, is the looking nothing? — the excitement? — the hope?"

I paused, quite carried away. Pam's eyes sparkled. I gave a sigh of relief.

"Tell me, Daddy," said Pam, and she snuggled close.

"They're here," I said cautiously. "All round us. Don't you feel them?"

Pam turned awe-struck eyes upon the hill.

"That's right," I encouraged. "Come on. Let's look for them. Fairies like to be looked for by the right people. What about that hollow tree? I've never seen a likelier place for a gnome."

But my daughter hung back. I saw her doubts had returned.

"The fairy-man sees fairies, Daddy."

I feared that remark was coming. It was what is colloquially described as a "nasty knock." Moreover, it was unfair. I make no pretensions. I am modest. Yet, here was Pam actually comparing an amateur with a professional. My masculine soul revolted. But, recollecting that it had to do with a woman, it resigned itself to being misunderstood.

"He stays out all night," continued Pam, "and sings and dances with them. When I asked him where he slept, he told me he slept in the bracken, or on the lee side of a mushroom. I remember it so well, 'cos I

didn't know then what the 'lee side' meant. D'you think Mummy would mind if I slept on the lee side of a mushroom with him, Daddy?"

"M—m, you'd have to ask her first. You mightn't like it. Mushrooms are awful things for giving one nightmare; and I hear from the skylarks there are no end of spiders in the bracken. Besides, I should not be the least astonished to hear that fairy-men kick in their sleep."

Pam looked at me. I tried to avoid her eye.

"You're cross, Daddy."

"I am."

"With me?"

"No, with myself. Come on. It's now or never. Let's look again."

We stood together on the fringe of the wood that shelters our glen. Down below us, leaping from fall to perilous fall, lost to sight in foliage, sang our beloved burn. The liquid music of its voice summoned memories of a spirit that was all life, all movement, but never monotony — for its moods alternated between pools of dreams and runnels of impetuosity. Around us lay a garden of nature, untilled and untouched by man — ferns beaded with dew, foxgloves drooping heavy heads, violets half lost in leaves, stumps of by-gone giants, moss-bemantled, and companies of living trees blotting out the blue above, and flinging their emerald-tinted shadows over the twilight below.

Surely if ever glen were fairy-haunted, it is ours.

Hand within hand, with bated breath, and with infinite precaution, Pam and I tiptoed into this palace of pure enchantment. I was anxious. All my reputation, as a person worthy to see fairies, was at stake. If Pam saw them and I did not, I was doomed. If the contrary happened, it would be nearly as bad. No, it

was absolutely imperative that we should see them together.

Now, as I believe fairies to be a condition of mind, receptive, childlike, full of faith, I strove passionately with all the will-power I possessed to banish incredulity and to place myself entirely at their disposal. "They are here," I whispered to my doubting soul. "They are here. I shall see them in a minute."

Hand in hand we stole forward.

The sunlight struck at us through a rift in the leaves.

A bird sang mockingly, and was still.

"They are here," I repeated.

All at once something touched my face — something so soft as to be almost intangible — so light, and cold, and impalpable as to resemble nothing in the whole world of sensation but the touch of fairy-fingers.

"What is it, Daddy?" whispered Pam, all breathless. "Have you seen one?"

"I don't know. Sh-h-h!"

I gazed nervously around. My heart was beating. The wood seemed hesitating on the brink of a secret. Was it —? Could it be —?

Then, above me, I caught sight of a broken gossamer diamonded with dew. That strand of gossamer jerked me back to realities as roughly as though it had been a cable.

"Let's go on," I said, masking disappointment behind an impassive front. My belief had received a severe shock — as for Pam, her faith filled the glen. The fevered pressure of her little hand told me what she was feeling.

Then, at the very moment when the blindness of humanity weighed heaviest on me, I was brought incontinently to a standstill.

"What is it, Daddy?" cried Pam again.

"Look—" I whispered in excitement. "Look—*there!*"

I pointed. Not a breath of air was abroad, and yet the fronds of the fern at which we were gazing moved perceptibly. Staring into it I saw—eyes.

"Pam," I gasped, "a fairy—at last!"

Then, as we stood and thrilled, not daring to move, scarcely daring to breathe, there came a sudden rush, a vision of something swift and brown, and a hare raced for the hill.

The memory of the next few minutes is painful beyond words. It shows me a middle-aged man seated on a tree-stump, his head between his hands, groaning aloud—and a small girl standing by his side, vainly endeavouring to comfort him.

"Never mind, Daddy."

"I do mind, Pam."

"You'll see one next time."

"I shan't. I shall never see one. I'm too old. I'm Jonah. *You* see fairies when you're alone. But you never see any with me. You would see them if you went out with the fairy-man, confound him! And I would like so much for us to see even one together. I wouldn't mind how small he was. I can't think what I've done. I believe they hate me. Anyway, I've disappointed you. You'd better leave me. I'm miserable."

"Oh, Daddy!" And, on the instant, I felt two, thin, little arms flung around my neck, and a warm little face passionately pressed to mine.

"Don't talk like that! I can't bear it, Daddy. I'd rather give up fairies altogether."

"No, no. That's terribly drastic. Better give me up."

"I couldn't. I wouldn't. I shan't. How *can* you talk like that? It's wicked. Don't you know you're my sweetheart? There's no one like you. You—you—"

her voice quavered. "You don't want to make me cry, do you, Daddy?"

"Good Heavens, no! Don't, Pam, don't! Here—sit here—on my knee. That's better. Oh, what a tender little heart it is! Let me see your face. Two tears? See, I'll kiss them away. And that little mouth too. 'How many kisses might it take—and give,' as Omar hath it?"

"Now you're just you again, for I don't know what you are talking about," cooed Pam contentedly.

"Come," said I, when unclouded sunshine had been restored, and my little daughter and I, hand within hand, had begun to climb the hill. "Come and look for spiders."

A wise man knows his limitations.

But less than halfway up the hill, Pam flagged. I felt her drag.

"You're all right?" I asked, concealing my anxiety.

"Quite all right, Daddy."

I looked at her. She had grown pale, and it struck me that there was something distressingly fragile—something transparent about her. A sudden fear stabbed at my heart.

"Come on," I said. "I'll carry you."

Profoundly did I mistrust her assurance that she was "quite all right." I had cause to do so. Did I not remember when she was dangerously ill, and that when I hung over the little bed and enquired, "Well, Pam, how are you to-day?" the answer invariably came: "Quite all right, Daddy." I knew that she would answer that if she were dying—God bless her! The pluck of women is a thing to make men go down on their knees!

We reached the bracken which I had maligned. Not a spider stirred. Pam—after two or three efforts to discover the lair of the fairy-man, a crumpled bed of

bracken, which she surmised would be a sacred spot, and one eminently fitted to inspire fairy-thoughts — resigned herself to the lesser rapture of a couch chosen by me. We lay down amicably, side by side, and surveyed the world over a miniature forest of glistening fronds.

I may state that conversations with Pam are my delight. I know of no one with whom I would more willingly exchange peaceful and somnolent thoughts on a golden afternoon than I would with Pam. There is a freshness, an originality, an enduring charm about her outlook that transcends even the fascination of childhood, and which I cannot but think is hers alone. Incidentally, I learn much from Pam. It may be that she learns somewhat from me. But, this I can say, if Pam reaps no benefit, it is not because she asks no questions, and not because I give no answers.

"Daddy," said Pam suddenly, "I have made up my mind."

This, striking her as an extremely grown-up thing to say, she assumed an air of mature importance.

"Always an excellent thing to do," I murmured approvingly, "provided your mind be made up wisely and not too well."

"I have made up my mind," continued Pam, ignoring my wisdom, "that I will be married without any engagement."

I turned round and looked at her. She was a charming little picture framed in giant fronds. She had recovered her colour; it did my heart good to see it. Her eyes of limpid blue, pure as the sky after rain, surveyed me with the most impressive seriousness.

"Won't that make it rather sudden, Pam? Mummy and I would like to have a few days' notice. There is always the wedding-present to order."

"And the cake?"

"Quite so. Now, I have no wish to be indiscreet, but if you don't mind discussing the subject—"

"I don't mind at all. That's what we're here for." Her eyes looked thoughtfully at the distant hills, and then suddenly sprang to my face. "Daddy, why do engagements to be married make you cry?"

"Do they? I never cried."

"Didn't you, Daddy? But grown-up men don't cry. If you had been made a girl you would have cried. Pretend you're a big girl. How would that make you feel about it?"

"If I were a big girl," I said slowly, thinking well in advance, "that is, big enough to become engaged, I should feel sorry to leave my good, kind, thoughtful Daddy. He would be terribly lonely—just terribly."

"Would he?" exclaimed Pam anxiously.

I nodded, as one who could not trust himself to speak. Upon which she twined her arm in mine and held me fast.

The wave of emotion subsided as speedily as it had arisen.

"Sarah says—" remarked Pam. (Sarah, by the way, is a minx of ten, a child who is no child, and can entertain no hopes of becoming one. Also, she is a monster whom I would joyfully smack.) "Sarah says she wouldn't cry if she got engaged. She'd think of the presents. She says more than that. When I asked her: 'What would you do if your parents died tonight?' she said: 'I would make myself perfectly happy with my relations.'"

"What a horrible child!" I cried with much personal feeling.

"I didn't think it was quite a nice thing to say myself," agreed Pam. "But then, thank goodness, neither of you are even ill!"

"Let's forget Sarah. She poisons the air. Tell me more about your engagement."

"Marriage," corrected Pam. "And engagements *do* make you cry. Diana cries."

I stared at her. She nodded slowly.

"I heard crying in our room last night. At first I was frightened, but God helped me to be brave, so I crept over to Diana's bed and got in. She was crying so hard. She held me tight, and kissed me, and sobbed —'Whatever shall I do? Oh, what *shall* I do?' What did she mean by that, Daddy?"

"I don't know."

"I said to her—'You've nothing to cry about, a big girl like you. Aren't you engaged to be married?' And she said, 'Ah, Pam, that's the reason.' What did she mean by that, Daddy?"

"I don't know. You mustn't tell me any more."

"Why, Daddy?"

"Because it was a private conversation. Diana never meant you to repeat it. She—wasn't herself."

"Oh, but she was! I could tell it was her at once."

"How do you like the fairy-man?" I plunged.

"I love him," said Pam fervently.

"That may possibly save him."

"Save him from what, Daddy? Oh, I know! You think he's likely to die. He is old, isn't he—over twenty, anyway. I hope he won't die before I marry him."

"I thought you were going to marry me."

"I'd simply love to. But don't tempt me too much, Daddy. My eyes have been opened. It would be a sin. Sarah says—"

"Damn Sarah!"

"Sh-h-h!" reproved Pam, finger on lip. "If God hears you damning Sarah, you'll hurt His feelings."

Pam has no awe of the Deity. For her He can be neither a "Jealous God" nor an "Avenging God." But He can be, and is, a loving God. Needless to state, hell has no significance for her whatever, beyond being a word which it is preferable to leave out of polite conversations. As far as her feeble strength will permit, she goes round protecting God's feelings. The idea of the Great Maker of the Universe being under the immediate protection of a small, human girl, does not seem to strike her as incongruous. I have known her lecture an old gipsy woman on the subject, so sweetly, and so persuasively, that it would not astonish me to hear that the blasphemous old harridan had given up the use of picturesque language altogether. Pam's religion is a religion of love — even as mine is a religion of beauty. I think sin is ugly; she thinks it is unkind. We both, I trust, seek to banish it. If the world only awoke to the wonderful possibilities of beauty, or joined Pam's society for the protection of the Deity, the Devil would soon find himself among the ranks of the unemployed.

"Why do you love the fairy-man, Pam?"

I awaited her answer with more interest than I cared to betray. I have faith — tremendous faith — in Pam's intuition. My own feelings concerning our extraordinary guest were in such a state of flux that I longed for some steadying influence to which I might anchor my own canoe.

Pam considered the subject in silence.

"I love him" — she said slowly, and after an interval — "because — because — Oh, Daddy! I find it so difficult to tell you."

"Try," I encouraged.

"Because," she resumed, "he's the part of me that's part of all that."

Her gesture included the whole radiant landscape —

the landscape that I, for one, thought the very heart of fairyland. I drew a deep breath.

"Ah, I can understand that, though I can hardly understand you feeling it. I believe you are a thousand years old, Pam. Now, little wise woman, tell me, is it a good part?"

"It's a beautiful part. You would call a flower a beautiful part, wouldn't you, Daddy?"

I repressed my growing excitement.

"One thing more, Pam. Do you feel that he's got it in him — I mean, do you feel that he could possibly —" my voice sank — "possibly hurt God's feelings? Oh, a great big hurt — one that it would take God a long time to get over?"

"No, Daddy. No. Never! Never! He's our dear fairy-man. He would never hurt anyone. How can you even think of such a dreadful thing? Oh, Daddy, how *can* you?"

Loyalty flamed in her face. Her childlike treble, with its adorable notes, trembled with the vehemence of her feelings. I, who knew her well, could read her distress — distress not that the fairy-man had been unjustly suspected, but that her Daddy had been the one to suspect him. Though not entirely convinced, I was abashed. Painfully conscious of moral inferiority, I endeavoured to lead the conversation to tea-parties. Pam, as usual, fell a victim to my ruse.

We had just agreed that meringues without a sufficiency of cream were as sand in the mouth of anticipation; when, with feminine inconsequence, Pam inquired:

"Do you love Lady Desmond, Daddy?"

"Good Heavens, no! Whatever put that into your head, Pam?"

"You look at her so kindly."

"I hope so. But kindness and love are not quite the same thing."

"They are to me," said Pam simply.

I kissed her. She returned it with interest.

"I suppose Mr. Vernon could marry if he liked, Daddy?" was her next question.

I assented.

"Anybody?" she enquired.

I was dubious — extremely dubious.

"Lady Desmond?" she suggested brightly.

"Out of the question!" I cried, honestly shocked at having the mere possibility of such an unnatural union forced upon my notice.

"Why not?" she demanded.

"She's married already — or rather was — and, being a widow, knows when to stop."

A few definitions of a widow were here sought for and obtained. Also, I was forced to deliver a short homily upon the matrimonial preferences of those whom an untoward fate had obliged for the second time to enter the ranks of single blessedness.

"I see —" said Pam thoughtfully; "and you think Mr. Desmond mightn't like it?"

"Sir George is dead, Pam. You haven't been taking in what I told you at all."

"But, Daddy, if he's dead, he can look on anyway."

I thought it just possible, though hardly to be desired. Pam agreed that it might be unpleasant.

"Now, if you were dead, Daddy" — my daughter turned to me cheerfully; then her face fell — "Don't look like that, Daddy! It is really not so terrible. If you were dead, you would be with God."

"I'd rather be with Mummy."

"Oh, Daddy!"

I saw instantly that I had hurt God's feelings.

When I had convinced Pam of my penitence, and she had slightly recovered, she returned to the charge.

"But, if you were *really* dead, Daddy — and if Mummy — "

"That will do, Pam. I am not dead, and don't intend to be. I absolutely refuse to discuss so distasteful a subject. Let's go home."

It was as we were proceeding arm in arm down the hill that Pam remarked:

"I've thought of another reason that I don't mean never to be engaged, Daddy."

"Two negatives," I pointed out, "make an affirmative." This impertinence Pam very properly ignored.

"Engaged people have to write letters."

I admitted the obligation. Pam continued:

"I'd hate it. I'd hate it as much as Diana does."

Now, as I have already shown, Diana's passion for letters was remarkable — not only for receiving letters, but for writing letters. I had had many opportunities for observing her letter-writing capabilities, previous to the arrival of the fairy-man. She gave me the impression of a ready scribbler. I am certain she gave Gerald the most exhaustive accounts of her life with us — so that I found it impossible to reconcile this statement of Pam's with facts as I knew them. I believe I expressed incredulity, for Pam bubbled over.

"She hates it, Daddy. She does. She can't think what to say. She nearly cries. She tore up two letters — half-written ones — this morning. I heard her say — "

"Pam!" I cried, sternly, "I told you before — "

"All right, Daddy. Don't be cross. I only forgot. I suppose grown-up people never forget — though Sarah says — "

But this time my language really silenced her.

CHAPTER XXXI

With all the good-will in the world, it was by no means easy for me to find out the state of Diana's feelings from herself. She practically existed for Pam. With the exception of the noonday hour, when Pam slept, Diana's mornings were parcelled out by Mary, as religiously as though the loss of half an hour would entail instant educational disaster. I — who lost dozens of half-hours, and felt all the better for it — looked upon this machinelike regularity with an awful admiration. "They have effectually fettered the nymph between them," thought I, as from a respectful distance I watched Mary and Diana discussing Pam's underclothing, or deciding what we should have for dinner.

But, had they? Would any amount of underclothing, or dinners, turn a nymph into a girl?

One morning, towards noon, the fates proved kind, for they permitted me to get Diana to myself for the space of half an hour. It happened in this wise.

Leaving the house, I had climbed by a rough track to the field wherein Kitty was wont to graze, when, halting to regain breath, I spied our little pony, but not alone, for with her was Diana.

Beautiful as was the scene, to me the picture made by the girl and the pony was still more beautiful. With her arms round Kitty's sturdy neck, Diana had the air of whispering secrets into an alert and attentive ear. Her inclined head held, as it were, the bright torch of her hair to the dark cloud of Kitty's mane.

But it was neither the pose nor the colour that at-

tracted me; it was the comradeship, the comprehension. Girl and pony were not only one with each other, but one with universal nature, one with high noon, and the sun upon the hill.

It seemed to me — standing there, watching — that I was again privileged to see Diana communing with nature. These rare hours of emancipation were, I knew, very precious to her. No doubt she drew strength and serenity from the great mother; and, maybe, a quiet and happy thought or two to take back to civilised life.

And, as though another witness were needed to proclaim her oneness with nature, a lark, that had been singing far overhead, now dropped from his airy station and, still singing, fell in spirals of descending song till he came to rest at her very feet — so near, indeed, that my first impression was that he had alighted on her shoulder.

Had she been true to her nymph-self, she would just have vanished when I hailed her, and I should have been left alone in the field, awed, and not a little perplexed. But, as the case was, she simply gazed at me, like one awakened from a happy dream.

At that I fell a victim to hesitation. Despite the fact that she had previously confided in me, I shrank from even the appearance of intervening. Her relations with Gerald were far too delicately personal to be approached without encouragement. At the same time, I did want to help her.

Fate is ever a grim jester, and to me there was irony in the fact that my presence should have the effect of recalling her to unhappiness.

With all her reticence, Diana was unable to banish feeling from her face. So sensitively and instantaneously did it mirror her emotions that, after one swift and almost involuntary look, I withdrew my eyes. To

spy upon her, I felt, would be to take an unfair advantage, like reading a diary written only for the eyes of the writer.

A soft breeze sighed from the west. I could see it rippling the tranquil surface of the loch below; setting all the trees a-talking; flinging a thousand dancing lights and shadows over the emerald carpet at our feet. It fluttered the soft folds of Diana's dress, and gently stirred the sun-bright meshes of her hair. The contrast between the peace that surrounded us and the inarticulate distress in this girl's heart came home to me trenchantly.

"I'm sorry," I faltered. "You're still unhappy. I hoped—"

She did not come to my assistance. Kitty, who had moved away at my approach, now gave vent to a little whinny—of interrogation, as it seemed—but her quondam playmate paid no attention.

Again I ventured to address her. "Is it always the same reason?" I asked, and nodded towards the house. She nodded back, the faintest possible motion.

All at once she drew herself up, there came a defiant little jerk of the head, and with challenging eyes she informed me that she was not afraid, not afraid at all.

I kept silent, divided between pity and admiration, for, though her eyes had flashed, her lips had trembled. I think that pathetic yet courageous refutation of her own previously uttered confession moved me more than anything she could have said.

A moment she paused—I believe to control her voice—then murmured: "But, I am very lonely."

It was not a complaint. It was simply the statement of a fact. I recognised its truth at once. She *was* very lonely. Our friends were not hers—our home was not hers—to a very small extent were our interests hers. She moved among us shackled by conventions. And,

no doubt, her imprisoned soul was beating ineffectual wings against the bars of circumstance all the time.

Life had not trained her for repression. The exceptional freedom that had come to so many of her sex with the advent of the Great War had come to her too, like a breath of liberty. I recalled scraps of information that had fallen from her, almost unawares: — her motor-ambulance work — her experience in the Dancing Academy. And there had been other occupations too. In all she had practically been her own mistress. But here — how different! It was as though she had again been put to school.

And was not love itself a profoundly troubling and unsettling influence? Did it not whisper to her that this term of banishment from her beloved was simply a marking time? Did it not paint the grey present as the mirage, and the golden future as the reality?

I believe she wanted to say more, but no words came. Words, however, were not necessary, for I saw by her hesitation that, for the time being, she felt the impossibility of confiding in me. It may be that she had forgotten, or even regretted, her former confidences: but of that I had no means of judging. Had I been a woman, it is possible that she would have unbosomed herself freely, and found a blessed relief in so doing. I even fancied that I read this in her eyes, shadowed forth by an all but unconscious recognition of the fact that I was a man, and that towards me, however kindly I might seem, it would be well to exercise a maidenly circumspection.

No doubt her mother had impressed this upon her — a parting advice; for, though the lady in question lacked sympathy, she did not appear, from Diana's account, to be wanting in worldly wisdom. I could not but agree, and that heartily, with a precaution intended to safeguard Diana, even though I were the loser, but

it did strike me as inconsistent that the armour of reticence should be donned at my approach, and yet doffed at that of the fairy-man. A moment's reflection, however, showed me that he and I acted on two entirely different Dianas.

"If only I had someone — someone — "

The whisper barely reached me. Sighed forth upon the sunlit air, it revealed an isolation that had nothing to do with the material loneliness already mentioned by Diana. "Someone"? Surely that meant a woman? Only a woman could enter fully into her difficulties. But it would have to be a very exceptional woman — one, not only sympathetic, but gifted with imagination. With all my heart I, too, wished there had been someone. But in whom could I advise her to confide? Not in her mother. Not in Mary. Neither would understand. The circumstances were too exceptional. And from me — the one being who saw and understood — Diana felt herself cut off by the threefold barrier of age, and sex, and the fact that I was her employer. It was as though her profession had encircled her with a wall within whose circumference she lived continually. And that, not of necessity, but from choice; in obedience to the instinct that would not permit her to overstep by one pace the line of conduct she judged it right to pursue.

There could be no doubt she was overstrained. "If only," I mused, "if only I possessed the magic carpet and could send for that young rascal Gerald!"

Ah, well, Gerald was far away, and the fairy-man — the chief reason of Diana's jangled nerves — was close at hand.

"We thought of having a picnic this afternoon," I said cheerfully.

I was rewarded by a slight gleam of interest.

"And," I continued, "don't take it so much to heart.

It's only for a few days. He hasn't mentioned a date, but it can't be long now. If I had only foreseen — I did, in a way, but nothing like this. It's most unfortunate. However, you can trust me to do my best. I can be very interfering when I try."

My feeble attempt at humour died. She was gazing at me as though she did not see me, as though her eyes were fixed upon something dark and even tragic. And, all the time, I was made aware of what I can only call the mysterious aloofness of her presence.

"It's not only him," she murmured. "It's myself."

There was no mistaking her meaning. I should have contradicted her, but I could bring myself to feign neither ignorance nor disbelief. And, all at once, the laughing face of nature struck a discordant note.

"It's the uncertainty," she murmured. "It weighs on my mind all the time. I keep on asking myself: 'What has happened? What will happen?' And there's no answer. It's dreadful! Why should I be like this? It was nothing before — I mean, not important, not vital. But now — "

I waited.

"Infinitely important now," she breathed, answering some unspoken thought; then, swept away by her feelings: "Because of my work, my position here, and — and other things."

She broke off suddenly. A wealth of significant meaning trembled in the last three words. When she spoke again I saw that I was forgotten. "It's the other half — the half I don't know. And yet I'm answerable. It isn't fair. No: it isn't fair!"

Her voice had risen. There was passion in the protest. It was the outcry of a proud and justice-loving nature against the cruelty and injustice of fate. It was as if she were two distinct people, and what could be

more unjust than to make one person suffer for the indiscretions of another?

I ventured a glance at her, and, to my slight embarrassment, found her gazing full at me. But no, it was through and beyond me she was staring, at some inward vision that had power to drive all colour from her face. There was a strange, and even dreadful, fascination in the dilated pupils of her eyes.

"You — you don't think I'm going mad?"

Indignantly I flouted the suggestion. No one, I assured her earnestly, goes mad who thinks he is going mad. Her depression came from a too sensitive mind; from brooding overmuch. "We can worry our minds into imagining anything — anything," I concluded.

She half turned, and looked darkly at the loch.

"This morning," she said, and her voice sank, "while bathing, I thought, what a relief, how easy, just to stop swimming — "

"Diana!" I cried. I was upset beyond words. I had had no idea! What stress of mind had she not suffered to give birth to so monstrous a possibility! And this was Diana! The girl who had always appealed to me as the embodiment of joy!

No one spoke. Our silence became weighted with uneasiness, as though the revelation of that sinister thought had imparted to it the guilt of a conspiracy. There was now an additional bond between us, for had we not together visualised that subject of all others most intimate and most final — death?

"Promise me," I pleaded, "that whatever happens, you will never do that — never think of it again even."

My distress moved her, for her voice softened as she gave me her word.

But the task I had set myself remained still unperformed. It was as delicate and well-nigh as impossible

as to capture a butterfly without injury to the rainbow-coloured dust upon its wings. I doubt if I should have attempted it had not Diana herself given me a cue.

"Where is he?" she asked in a whisper.

"On the lawn, fast asleep. He sleeps at any odd moment, like the dogs. I expect he needs it. I stood and looked at him for some time. It's queer —"

"Yes?" she murmured.

"Well" — I gave a little embarrassed laugh — "he loses it in his sleep. Yes, I mean his — his — I suppose you would call it magnetism. I felt quite different. I could criticise, and discriminate, and — that sort of thing. He looked as angelic and innocuous as a cherub. His half-smile was like a reflection from Olympus."

"I like him like that."

"Ah!" I looked shrewdly at her. "You've seen him like that? He has been like that sometimes when you and he are alone together?"

She pressed a hand to her brow. "I — I think so. I seem to remember —"

I waited for her to finish, but, as the silence remained unbroken, I again looked at her. She was staring fixedly towards the house. Something moved in the shadow of the eastern gable.

"He's looking for you, Diana," I said in a loud voice.

"No, no!" she panted.

A moment later, however, my surmise was proved correct, for, catching sight of us, the fairy-man neared us at a run.

"Don't leave me," she whispered nervously.

"We'll face the danger together," said I, smiling. "It's two to one. We'll deny that he is a danger. We'll force him to be as sane and sensible as we are. You are not going to be anyone but your real self, Diana. Remember that. Keep on remembering it. D'you understand?"

"I do. Oh, I do!"

"That's right. Now, he'll be here in a minute. We'll just take him at his face value — a laugh. I'm damned if I'll do more. You're not frightened. I admired you awfully when you said that. You've got grit. You've got something big to fight for; and every victory makes it easier next time. Here he is. By gad! he took that gate neatly. I could once. — Hullo! Hullo!"

He joined us with a rush. He wasn't even out of breath. He said he felt like a lion refreshed. But I can compare him to nothing half as spontaneous or as irresistible as himself. He linked his arm in mine. His eyes delighted in Diana. He was all jokes, and gusto, and fun. Not for one moment did he suspect that we had conspired against him. Among a host of uncertainties, that, I think, is certain. His manner gave me the impression that he knew we loved him, as much as he loved us; — that he knew he was tremendously welcome, in fact that we should have been grievously disappointed had he not rushed to find us the moment he was awake! What could one do with a fellow like that? For my part, I found it impossible to be stiff, or even becomingly dignified.

I stole a glance at Diana. Her face was a study in emotions. There was no doubt she was putting up a fight. Her eyes — blue as cornflowers, and utterly clear, like hill air — were fixed on him with an expression that I have seen once in the eyes of a doe, confronted suddenly by a bright light — a blend of timidity, curiosity, apprehension, and fascination.

All that I have said — all that is within my power to say — does not even begin to tell of the appealing quality of his joyousness, or its mesmeric effect upon Diana. My description of the apparent spontaneity and artlessness of his manner would be appropriate had I been depicting a child — a little spoilt, perhaps, but other-

wise delightful. There was, however, much more than that. Underlying the veneer of simple jollity, I vaguely suspected an influence — extremely illusive and subtle — that was at work all the time. I might call it a stirring-up of memories were I convinced that memories existed. Thought-transference, perhaps, comes nearer to the mark. He was creating an atmosphere. He was suggesting possibilities. With his exuberance and joy, with his frank appeal to the laughter of life, he was busily weaving a web, imponderable as gossamer, viewless as wind, wherewith to capture the dreaming fancy of Diana. Was he conscious of it, or not? That was the question.

Given two people who have met before — or who imagine they have done so — who shall say how many links connect them with the past? Of course all this might have been illusion on my part. I freely admit the possibility now. But, as I stood there, beside these two young people, with them, but, assuredly, not of them, it seemed to me that messages passed and repassed, as clandestinely as though this enigma of a guest — laughing and chatting innocently all the time — were making signs to the girl behind my back!

"Diana," I interrupted, "I don't want to hurry you; but it must be nearly one o'clock."

Thank Heaven, that steadied her, and it was with a thankful heart that I watched her speed before us towards the house.

CHAPTER XXXII

Much as my mind was exercised by the unhappiness of Diana, yet, in my rôle of host, I was forced to present a smiling front to the world. This, no doubt, was a blessing in disguise. The resolute appearance of cheerfulness will sometimes create an atmosphere as optimistic as cheerfulness itself. At all events, as I told Diana, no good could come from being overanxious, or by imputing to the fairy-man motives which it was just possible he did not possess. And, after all — I explained — he was just an ordinary guest. He might confidently be expected to leave in another week at most. When he had gone, all would be as it had been before.

But Diana had listened, visibly the prey to forebodings. What wonder I had failed to reassure her? All my arguments were fallacious. He was *not* just an ordinary guest. Nor could he be confidently expected to do anything. Would he take a well-timed departure? Not he. If I knew anything about him (which I didn't!), he was just as likely to leave us in half an hour, or to remain with us for the term of his natural life. And, lastly, I doubted extremely whether, after this place knew him no more, things would be as they had been. For this apprehension Gamine was responsible. Had she not long ago prognosticated that when — following the reprehensible lead of Cupid — the fairy-man flew out of the window for good, he would take so much away with him that life would never be the same again?

This recalls me to Gamine. Now, gallantry forbid

that I should call her exacting! And yet, there is no doubt that she fully expected me, or the Mountain, or the fairy-man, or all three of us together, to "dance attendance." And as the worthy Mountain divided his allegiance between Mary and golf courses; and as the fairy-man preferred Diana, though he occasionally put up with me; it consequently fell to my lot to dance alone.

Far be it from me to complain! Exercise is good for a middle-aged man. Thank Heaven, my heart was safe — though Gamine insisted that it was in continual danger. We had so little in common, she and I, that all interchange of ideas was uncommonly interesting. For a young and pretty lady to bestow her society upon an old duffer was flattering; and gratitude filled the heart of the old duffer, even while modestly suspecting that the lady was trying to play scales upon the keyboard of his affections merely to keep her hand in.

As a pleasant antidote to anxiety, Gamine was in every way excellent. Treated by a doctor so charming, depression fled. Her pills were sugar-coated. Her bedside-manner was all that could be desired. A smile, or a touch from her little hand, and the most unpalatable truth left no nauseous taste. Her greatest asset as a consulting physician was the confidence she inspired. With no one else did I feel so hopeful, so reconciled to myself, so forgetful of advancing age. And, assuredly, with no one else was I so conscious of the exhilarating certainty that I was a man. After all, it was but a pleasant interlude for both of us. A few fleeting summer days and she would be whirled into the maelstrom of society; and I — in my peaceful backwater — would wonder if it had all been a dream.

But the question often arose, what to do with Gamine; for not at once did I grasp the fact that the only thing to do with her was to do nothing. Our pastimes,

being all of a pastoral or mildly sporting nature, did not commend themselves to her enthusiasm. Rabbits left her cold. To rise betimes, when bed was still alluring, or to sally forth at dusk, when she could neither see nor be seen, struck her simply as distasteful. Her idea of fishing was probably unique. It would certainly have brought tears to the eyes of Izaak Walton; for it considered as indispensable a hammock, a box of cigarettes, and a novel.

Now, this account of Gamine's incapabilities as a sportswoman is misleading. It implies incompetence, whereas it ought only to imply inertia. A masterly and carefully considered inactivity was at the root of it — the historical "wait and see" attitude, in private instead of public life.

But the pastime that did recommend itself to Gamine was boating.

Thus it was that the morning of which I write saw Gamine and me gliding out of the shadow-haunted boat-house into the sunshine that flooded the world.

Settled among the cushions, like a moss-rose among leaves, Gamine was obviously approving of the scenic effects, as graciously as though they were triumphal arches and illuminated addresses designed solely in her honour. Over her faintly smiling face her wide-brimmed hat cast a cool, translucent shadow; and, as if this were not enough to protect a complexion that justly laid claim to being considered a masterpiece, higher still hovered a miniature sunshade, tenderly tinted as a petal.

Slowly, imperceptibly, the boat-house dropped astern. Above the fringe of silver-birches, Ledecriech came into sight, white-walled, grey-roofed, gazing at us Argus-eyed, with a calm and smiling beneficence, as though it were assuring us that it stood for more than material shelter. Higher still — as my leisurely stroke

propelled us ever farther from the shore — the great hill behind our house heaved itself up. Our leafy glen, starting at its feet and climbing almost waist-high, effectually concealed our water-kelpie of a burn. No whisper of sound was wafted to where we floated between earth and heaven, but I knew that her song haunted all the northern shore; and that, in times of spate, it even attained to the great bluff shoulder, forever communing with the clouds.

Viewed from the land, we must have looked like an insignificant mote in the radiant eye of the sun; if, indeed, we could be seen at all for excess of light. A wave of heat moved with us. It quivered along the glassy surface of the water, and within its warmth a host of little gnats danced away their lives. The metal parts of the boat winked like heliographs; and, when I ceased rowing, drops of liquid light pursued each other along the blades of my suspended oars.

Allowing the boat to drift, I mopped my face and neck, then turned approving eyes on my shipmate. Surrounded by an aureole of light, she was sitting very still. Her white dress attracted the sun; even her little white-suède shoes appeared to absorb light. As for her ridiculous sunshade, it had the vacillating air of a butterfly, and the tethered appearance of one of those delicately coloured balloons that children love to tug at with a string.

"People are very interesting, Jack."

"Some," I qualified.

"No. All. Even the most ordinary are extraordinary sometimes. They hide themselves in words, or in silence. They are so different — and yet they've all got something in common, the universal factor, I suppose. I always pity a woman who thinks all men alike; and, even more, a man who thinks all women alike — it proclaims their own limitations. Humanity is like a jig-

saw puzzle. You've got to guess, and the chances are you guess wrong. I love guessing. Not just out of curiosity, but from real interest. That's why people don't mind me, for no one objects to be thought interesting. Class distinctions are just no distinctions at all. A great passion may smoulder under a cheap, and even a vulgar, jumper."

"The only pity is that it can't set fire to it."

"Don't be flippant, Jack, when I'm being so serious. And you're wrong. The pity would be if it got burnt. Clothes are so informative. And look at their influence on character. I've seen hats I could almost suffer martyrdom in; and others in which I'd feel — well, no better than I ought."

"Which is saying a good deal," I murmured.

"I'm a liberal education for you, Jack," she continued, unheeding. "Good husbands get in a groove, and I expect I say all the things that Mary doesn't think. I like to talk. I've always felt so sorry for that tongueless nightingale that died of a broken heart."

"He sounds like a poetical licence."

"He couldn't sound at all. That was his trouble — his fate. And I daresay there was a little brown lady of a nightingale who looked up to him as a strong, silent bird, and who was quite willing to marry him and talk for two, if only he'd given her the chance. But, apropos of fate, it certainly looks like fate our meeting him in that London restaurant."

More or less accustomed to Gamine's mental gymnastics, I smiled.

"Yours or mine?"

"His and hers."

I made no comment, but instinctively looked in the direction of the now distant house. No sign of life was to be seen. Diana was still in the school-room, safe for another hour at least.

"Would you like to take an oar?" I suggested.

"I would not — and you know it. I think I must be the reincarnation of my great-great-grandmother; she had a great talent for sitting for days inside a crinoline. But — what was I saying? Oh, yes, wasn't I clever to diagnose him so well? It was really very nice of you, Jack, to arrange this little drama. Don't grunt. I feel as thrilled as if the curtain were going up on a fifth act, and everyone asking: 'Will the heroine remain virtuous?' Now, what's the matter?"

"Matter!" I nearly shouted. "Good God! how can you talk in that callous way?"

Gamine leant forward. Her eyes expressed genuine concern.

"I'm sorry, Jack. I didn't mean it. I'm not as bad as I sound. I can't help being thrilled — it's so exciting to watch. But I like the girl really, and only wish I could help her. There, old boy, am I forgiven?"

Of course I answered in the affirmative. I would forgive her almost anything, and she knows it, and, I suspect, trades on it too. Indeed, my outburst had been occasioned nearly as much by a feeling of acute disappointment in Gamine as by indignation at her reference to Diana.

"It's queer —" I puzzled, as I again immersed the gleaming blades, and pulled a languid stroke. "I talk to the Mountain, Pam, Mary, and now you. What about? Why, the fairy-man every time. It's uncanny. He obsesses us all. The scenery too. It's as if something bottled had suddenly come uncorked — as if the wine of yesterday made mad the wits of to-day; or like that story in the Arabian Nights in which the fisherman caught a jar in his net, and, opening it, let loose a dangerous afrite. The fairy-man is the result of our fishing, Gamine."

There fell a little silence, during which the boat

drifted towards the shore. So imperceptible was the movement, and so mirrorlike was the surface of the water, that Gamine's shadow — quivering in the wave's intenser day — had all the appearance of solidity.

"What puzzles me" — she broke the silence abruptly — "is his manner towards her."

I waited with interest.

"If a man I'd just met was as cavalier to me —"

"But they haven't just met."

The sunshade became agitated. Thereupon I narrated the reincarnation theory. Gamine's face leapt to animation.

"But — how lovely!"

I sighed. That I was fated to listen to something frivolous was a foregone conclusion.

"How perfectly romantic! I could find it in my heart to envy her. A young, dark, distinguished, mysterious stranger (he's all that) suddenly appears and claims her because of her past.

'When I was a king in Babylon,
And you were a Christian slave.'

Jack! — can't *we* do it? Can't you remember *me* at all? Do think!"

To be quite truthful, Gamine's flippancy jarred. I felt like a man floating in a boat down a river, who encounters half a mile of shallow and perfectly unnavigable water. It is a poor consolation for him to know that there are deep pools and splendid currents while he is stranded amid a babble of froth and foam. Moreover, no amount of thought could assist me in conjuring from my past anything half so frivolous as Gamine, and I told her so as politely as I could. I believe she looked upon it as a sort of game, and was disappointed because I refused to play.

Returning to the subject of our discussion, she

pointed out that it gave him a tremendous pull over her. With extreme reluctance, I conceded the point.

"Two men" — she tapped the gunwale twice — "pulling two ways."

"Nothing is stronger than love," I affirmed with conviction.

"I wonder. But we mustn't forget the elemental is on the spot."

"So am I," said I grimly.

This calling for explanation, I touched upon my self-imposed partnership with the absent Gerald. Gamine smiled.

"Nothing of that sort!" I retorted with heat. "I'm merely here to remind her — not that she needs it, of course. But — she's unhappy, Gamine."

And, having made this admission, I confided to her what Pam had told me.

"I knew it!" she cried, and there was no triumph, but an unusual gravity in the ejaculation. "He's a wicked necromancer," she continued, shaking her wise little head. "And all his fairy-stories, and all his suggestions about the past, are just his stock in trade, the ingredients of a love-philtre. And the poor, credulous girl has drunk it. And it's working. Now virtue support Diana!"

"Good Heavens!" cried I, letting go both oars. "D'you mean it?"

She did.

"You think that he — that she —"

"Both. Don't take it so much to heart, old boy."

"To heart! What does my taking it to heart matter! It's Diana — if I really thought — look here, I told her that he'd probably be leaving in a few days, but this puts the lid on. I'll get rid of him — I'll turn him out."

"For merely looking at your governess?"

"Remember," she went on with sympathy, as I sat

speechless, "we've no proof — not yet. And, if you turn him out, you'll put yourself in the wrong. You'll be as elemental as he is. You can't do it, Jack. Hospitality has laws. You're bound to respect them."

"Confound hospitality, and confound all guests!"

CHAPTER XXXIII

It was a petulant outburst, inexcusable in a child, and much more so in a grown man, and the moment I had given vent to it, I was ashamed. Gamine thanked me so prettily too, in the name of all guests past, present, and future, that her very affability but deepened my repentance.

We were by this time come to a part of the loch overhung by great branches of trees. No retreat more delightful upon a hot day could be imagined. The emerald canopy overhead reproduced itself with photographic exactitude in the emerald water below. Among cool, translucent shadows we had anchored, and our little boat now lay as motionless as though its component parts had returned to the great trees from which they had sprung.

"Just the place for lovers," murmured Gamine, furling her sunshade.

Did I read in her voice, in her eyes, a wistful yearning that the fancied proclivities of the place should be put to instant proof? I hope not, but—

How freely she would have translated my partly amused, partly apprehensive silence had nothing interfered, I cannot tell; but just at that moment, the gods willed it that we should see Mary, accompanied by the Mountain, strolling along the edge of the loch. Too far off to be hailed, they were apparently near enough to arouse my companion's emotions.

"She's a happy woman!"

With considerable complacency Mary's husband ac-

knowledged the compliment. But the lady's mind had leapt like a squirrel to another branch.

"It's a mad world, Jack," she said in a tone that jocularly veiled a deeper meaning; "a mad, topsy-turvy world. Men and women shaken together in the dice-box of chance, and then tossed out two by two, just — just any old how."

"All sixes and sevens," I agreed cheerfully.

She looked quickly at me from under the wide brim of her hat, and the expression in her eyes astonished me — penetrating and sad, it seemed to be gauging the profundity of my most secret thoughts.

"Only a happy man would have said that, and in that way," she said slowly.

"Quite right. I am happy. Happier than I deserve. I often feel like sacrificing to the gods on every mountain-top, just to ward off jealousy. I'd like to see you happy, too, Gamine."

Her firm little chin tilted up. Her eyes challenged me.

"How d'you know I'm not happy?" she demanded.

This was a poser. It was also something in the nature of a trap. How could I explain the processes of purely deductive reasoning that had led me to that conclusion? How could I tell the lady that, as far as chance and she herself had given me the opportunity of judging, her life had hitherto missed the one thing essential to happiness? Her delightful frankness it was that rescued me from an awkward dilemma.

"You're right!" she exclaimed suddenly. "Though I can't imagine how you found it out. I believe you're the only person who has guessed it. Once I thought I had captured the blue bird of happiness; but it flew away, and has mocked me ever since." She stopped, patted the cushions absent-mindedly, then went on: "I've thought a great deal about it — lately. Wise men

like Plato and Marcus Aurelius tell us that happiness comes from within and that it never comes till one is ready for it. I wonder . . . ! Don't we all think we're ready for it, always, at all times? I suppose I wasn't ready — then, I mean. Of course I thought I was. But no; I didn't think at all. Youth takes happiness for granted. I did. I never analysed — just grasped at it — as my right, you know. But now — I'm different. Oh, ever so different! — incredulous — older too. It would mean — Jack, I'm afraid."

She turned to me — troubled — moved.

This was to me a new Gamine. That she was many-sided I knew well; but it was the first time that she had intentionally revealed anything of graver import beneath the elusively sparkling exterior. Fully aware that anything that I might say — however sympathetic — would but break the unusually confidential current of her thoughts, I kept silent.

"You hardly knew George at all; did you, Jack?"

"Not much," I acquiesced, as I prodded tobacco into my pipe.

She shook her head slightly, an almost imperceptible motion.

"I expect many people find me uninteresting," I said, to fill an awkward pause. "You don't mind me smoking? It'll keep off the midges."

"It's nice of you to take it like that," she murmured gratefully. "That Sunday in South Kensington Museum — "

Her voice faltered, ceased, then faintly, in the dead hush beneath the branches, I heard the murmured words: "Ashamed. Humiliated."

Attentively examining the flame of the match that burned without a flicker in the windless air, I made answer that it was nothing; that I had never thought of it again. The match died suddenly, its use for-

gotten till too late. I felt her eyes on me as I struck another, then, as I puffed, her voice assured me gravely that she knew otherwise, and that she had been grateful.

"Cruel to be kind, Jack," she said, with a flash of her old smiling self. "You punished us both, to spare me. Oh, I knew. When you stopped coming, I put two and two together."

"It's more than I did, Gamine. I own to having been considerably in the dark. Of course I couldn't just drop out of your life for years, and not think about it. I thought a good deal, but not to much purpose, unfortunately."

"What did you think?"

I blew a cloud of smoke and watched it drift and disappear before I made answer:

"It sounds a fatuous thing to say, but I did put it down to — to —"

"Well?"

"To jealousy."

As she made no comment, I stole a rather anxious glance in her direction. She was sitting perfectly still. The furled silk of the ridiculous little sunshade made a faintly coloured splash against the white background of her skirt. Her gloved hands were, I noticed, clasping the pale-blue enamelled handle with unnecessary tightness. More I could not learn, for the broad brim of her hat concealed her face.

"It was I who had cause for jealousy."

These whispered words, falling from lips as habitually smiling as those of Gamine, arrested my attention. The tone of her voice weighted the confession with significance. It was, as I have said, the first time she had taken me even partially into her confidence. Loyalty to the dead; or, possibly, as I dimly surmised, a lingering tenderness for something beautiful that had

been killed; or, perhaps, just natural delicacy, had restrained her.

It seemed at first that I was fated to learn no more. Dimly conscious of the presence of two contradictory impulses — a wish to confide, and a disinclination to speak — I too remained silent. The few words that had escaped her impulsively, almost inadvertently, had already betrayed something. But there was more to come. My pipe had gone out. Everything around us seemed to wait, to listen, to be as silent and as motionless as myself. It is curious what trivialities will occupy the mind at moments of emotional intensity. The brim of her hat obsessed me. In some mysterious manner it allied itself with the one solitary little gush of confidence that had come from behind it. Curving in an ellipse, blotting out a patch of blue and distant sky, it appeared for the moment to be the one thing worthy of attention in a world without movement and without sound.

All at once the brim tossed itself upwards and her face flashed upon me. I have alluded many times to her eyes, but no words of mine seem capable of even beginning to tell of the haunting, arresting, enticing quality of their regard. They baffle, and yet allure. Under their immediate influence I can imagine men committing crimes or achieving martyrdom. Eyes like Gamine's constitute a tremendous moral responsibility. She will be asked one day, "What have you done with your eyes?" and if she can only point to a row of broken hearts, Heaven help her!

From under the raised brim these eyes looked at me and through me.

"You puzzle me sometimes, Jack," she mused, knitting her brows.

"It's something to puzzle a Gamine," I rejoined, smiling.

"Sometimes you see no farther than the tip of your own rather nice nose; and at others you amaze me by your beautiful, your almost feminine intuition."

As this was apparently intended for a compliment, I thanked her.

"Just now," she continued approvingly, "you know what's passing in my mind as well as I do myself."

"To be or—"

"Exactly."

"I was wondering which would win."

"I know you were. Well, it may interest you to know that the 'not to be' has it."

I signified my approval. "No good can come from raking things up," I added lightly.

"Besides—I've told you."

"Have you?"

"Don't be irritating, Jack. You know I have. And, what's more, I saw you understood. A woman hates to be made to dot her *i*'s."

"All right, Gamine, we'll consider the subject closed. I told you I thought you were very wise. Words are crude things; and you certainly have a wonderful talent for imparting information, and even emotions, without them. Moreover, least said, soonest—"

"But I don't want to be mended that way."

I shrugged my shoulders—as they were no more than a matter of a foot from her wide, reproachful eyes, she could not very well ignore them.

"Now you're spoiling everything!" she cried.

"What *do* you want?" I asked helplessly.

"How can I tell? *You* ought to know. I praised you too soon. Where's the intuition you boast of? Can't you feel? Can't you see? Can't you help me to make up my mind?"

"Yes—oh, of course," I stammered; then with positive inspiration, and with an engaging frankness

that would have disarmed the Unjust Judge, "Gamine, I apologise. I was wrong."

She smiled. I continued:

"I might have known — I ought to have known — "

Her nod expressed unqualified approval.

"— That no woman really likes silence. Have patience, Gamine; let me go on. Masculine obtuseness can only be enlightened by multiplicity of feminine words. I fully realise that it's unsatisfactory for you not to know if I know, when there's something to know that's worth knowing. And," I continued, extracting myself breathlessly, "a sorrow shared — "

"That's it!" she cried, and, judging from her face, it certainly appeared to be at last.

"All the same," I continued reflectively, "if I puzzle you, you puzzle me still more. It's the perfection and polish of the veneer that dazzles me. It seems so — so genuine. Sometimes I find myself asking, 'Is this the real thing?' Sometimes I even accuse you of obtaining emotions under false pretences."

"Oh, Jack!"

"I know. It's beastly of me. I'm all wrong. It's your laughing outlook that deceives. I laugh too. And then — then there comes a note, a word, sometimes just a look, and all at once I realise that I'm only on the surface, and you're away down in the depths. Who taught you to laugh like that, Gamine?"

"Life taught me, Jack. I soon discovered it was either laughter or — well, the other thing. What's that line about poets learning in suffering what they teach in song? We can't all sing, but we can laugh."

I looked at her with admiration. She seemed such a small, such an exquisitely finished casket to contain qualities so Spartan.

"I believe the aristocrats during the Terror went to the guillotine with your smile, Gamine."

She laughed at me, of course, but I think that the feeling that prompted the somewhat lurid simile pleased her, for her eyes rested on me with a very kindly smile.

"I'm glad you advise me to make a clean breast of it, Jack, dear. It's clever of you to know that to-day, somehow, I feel like part of the marriage service — that exciting part that is so rarely taken advantage of except in novels — in which the clergyman requests the congregation to speak or be forever silent. I'm quite sure I couldn't be forever silent, so I'll speak now. You ought to be fearfully flattered, for I've told no one, not even my own mother — least of all my own mother, for she ought to have known and warned me, but didn't. Where was I? Oh, yes. What I wanted to say was that I've got a breathless feeling, the sort of feeling you get when you at last make up your mind to jump into a cold bath. Perhaps you'll warm the water for me, Jack, or hold my hand while I plunge. Someone who knew too much — I think it was Mrs. Patrick Campbell — said that there was no such thing as the present. It was only the past coming back again . . . Jack, I'd hate that. My past is a ghost — such a sorrowful, distrustful little ghost. It haunts me. It keeps on murmuring warnings and forebodings. If I tell you all about it, I may get it off my chest. It'll lay the ghost. That's it. We'll exorcise it together, you and I. I want to begin again quite fresh. I've a right to some happiness. Life owes me a little genuine laughter. Now, don't talk — listen — just let me tell it in my own way."

She began the narration, very much in her own way, a way which I am inclined to think is shared by no one else — while I, my pipe relit, listened in silence. A spell of enchantment kept everything silent too, for not a leaf trembled, not a branch creaked. A water-bird, with a golden beak and bright, unwinking eyes, inspected us

from a distance, and a water-rat, lulled into fancied security by the softly murmuring voice, slipped noiselessly into the sleeping loch, and, steering close to us, took a short cut to his destination.

"Well, Jack?" she said interrogatively when she had finished.

"Well, Gamine," I responded.

Impulsively she laid a little gloved hand upon my knee.

"Dear old boy!" she said, and for the first time her voice was a little unsteady. "You spoil me. You know that I'd hate you if you said anything, so you shut your grim old mouth upon a 'Well' that isn't anything, because it's just everything. All the same, I can see that you're wondering why the frivolous little woman you call Gamine has told you all this. And, being a woman, she doesn't know herself; unless for the reason I've given you; and also, perhaps, for the reason that when a woman is sufficiently roused she generally goes the whole hog; which is a vulgar expression, but, like most vulgar things, is true."

"And then he died, Gamine?"

"Yes, he died — drowned — you heard. When they told me, I couldn't cry. I couldn't even pretend to be heartbroken, for if my heart could have broken, it would have broken long before. I remember saying to myself, 'He's dead. He's dead. I shall never see him again' — trying to realise it, trying to stifle something in me that would only cry, 'You're free. You're free. You won't be made to suffer again.' Nice of you to pat my hand. I knew you would understand. But I don't think even you can understand how it has warped my whole nature; how it taught me to suspect good looks, and winning manners, and all that generally attracts other women. What do looks, or anything else, matter as long as the man's true blue, and as long as the

woman knows that she is the only woman in the world for him?"

"You're free," I echoed.

"Yes, I'm free; but I sometimes think one can pay too much for freedom. The mask of frivolity I was forced to wear has become a habit, and like all bad habits is difficult to get rid of. It has taken in lots of people, even you a little, my friend. Well"—she gave a dreary little laugh—"It's not a nice story, is it? Thank Heaven, I can write *finis* to it. And thank Heaven, too, I could forgive him as he lay there, for death gave him back a great deal that he had lost. He looked so young. He woke the mother-spirit in me. I just thought of him as of a poor foolish boy who had made a mess of both of our lives by grasping at shadows, and perhaps realised it only while he was drowning, when it was too late."

In the silence that ensued, the song of a soaring lark, voicing its freedom and its joy, was clearly audible.

CHAPTER XXXIV

And now I have to record a happening which not one out of fifty people will believe ever to have happened at all. 'Tis an ungrateful task. Yet, as the biographer of the fairy-man during the short space of time in which he troubled and delighted our existence, I feel strongly that it is my duty to set down everything — everything, that is, that came under my own observation — sustained by the pure goddess of Truth, and serenely indifferent as to whether I am believed or no.

Like a wise man I first consulted the ladies of my household.

Mary — Heaven forgive her! — saw no occasion for writing anything at all. In her excuse it must be confessed that I ventured to ask her advice while she was deep in the mysteries of the house-accounts. I should have known better.

Pam — blessings on her sunny head! — was more encouraging. Her advice combined the clear-sighted vision of a child and the hoary wisdom of Solomon at his best. After listening with grave and flattering attention to my dilemma, she spoke as follows: "I think, Daddy, dear, if you begin the story with 'Once upon a time,' it will tell everyone what to expect." I thanked her profusely. We kissed. After which, without loss of time, I seized my pen and wrote:

Once upon a time there was a picnic. Glen Buckie was chosen as our destination; a glen endeared to us by reason of its happy sylvan atmosphere, its joyous little burn that tumbled as it ran, its pine forests' in-

finite aisles, and its general aspect of wise and peaceful serenity.

The party was to separate, but to meet again. Mary, Pam, Diana, and the tea — from which Pam refused to be parted — were to drive in the pony-trap. Gamine and the Mountain were to walk through Balquhidder village, to cross the picturesque bridge that spans the river at Stronvar, and to follow the friendly road that leads the wayfarer deeper and deeper into the purple secrets of the hills.

The fairy-man and I were to row across the loch, to pursue the path that skirts the pine-wood, to climb up and up, and finally to drop down and down to the appointed place.

That Gamine and the Mountain should be forced into each other's society, even for the space of time required to walk from Ledecriech to Glen Buckie, seemed to me regrettable. That they had gone out together on previous occasions scarcely excused this somewhat arbitrary arrangement, for — as I was firmly convinced — they had done so from purely unselfish motives, and I hold that it is scarcely decent of a host or hostess to count too confidently upon the continued unselfishness of their guests. Of course, it was Mary acting for the best, and I, on my return from harnessing Kitty — translating Gamine's expression into pathetic resignation, and the Mountain's into a fatalistic acceptance of the will of Mary — told She-who-must-be-obeyed exactly what I thought of her generalship. Her answer — that it was too late now to make any alterations — did not tend to raise my spirits.

How the others fared on their way to the picnic I cannot tell, but I am certain that none of their experiences equalled the one I am about to narrate.

The fairy-man and I rowed across the loch — an affair of ten minutes — moored our little boat to a

stone against the hour of our return, and set off at a good round pace. The path affording but footing for one, we walked in Indian file, he leading.

My companion was in high spirits. The wild hill scenery, the fine, tonic air, the sense of freedom, all intoxicated him. He laughed, he sang, he even danced. He seemed as emancipated from all necessity of proceeding undeviatingly as a young dog. You might have sworn that the path, as a path, had no significance for him. True, he occasionally made use of it, but only when it happened to run with his inclinations, and even then he did not walk like a human being, but leaped and skipped like a goat. For the most part he ignored the track altogether, sped up hills to snuff the unpolluted air, sped down them to snatch at a tuft of heather, which, I noticed, he invariably and almost immediately threw away. As a rule, however, he kept obligingly enough within earshot, and treated me with much the same long-suffering complacency as an active dog treats an inactive master.

Plodding along staidly at some distance behind him, I could not but feel that I was a serious drag upon his erratic and unwearying movements, and that he could, had he so desired, have bounded up twenty hills in the time I should have taken to climb one.

It must be confessed that I did not share his bounding exuberance. I saw nothing risible to laugh at, or exciting to talk about. Moreover, being not a little out of breath, and sensible of the persecution of a corn, I felt far indeed from dancing.

Two things had conspired to disturb my equanimity. One was that Diana had behaved very strangely when informed by Mary that she was to drive in the pony-trap. As a rule Diana accepted every plan made for her with cheerful alacrity. But upon this occasion she hesitated. The fairy-man was standing near. Distinctly

I saw her blue eyes seek his, and as distinctly I saw his green eyes flash in answer. At once Diana asked Mary if she might walk to Glen Buckie with me.

With *me!* Oh, the minx! Was ever well-meaning, middle-aged gentleman more shamelessly made use of?

The extraordinary thing — the thing that impressed me most — was that, to the best of my belief, Diana had been eluding the fairy-man all morning; and that not till she actually came within sound of his voice did she evince any desire to be near him.

Then, too, some of the sayings of Gamine would return to distressful memory. She had more or less denounced the fairy-man as an impostor, and yet one who (because of the fetish of hospitality, forsooth!) could not be flung out of doors.

As long as I visualised the possibility — even the shadowy and remote possibility — of Gamine being in the right, all my mental energies were strenuously directed to combating the insidious charm of our singular guest. I would *not* fall a victim. I refused to like him. What! Like a fellow who was trying to take us all in with his cock-and-bull stories? Not if I knew it. What! Lavish affection upon this unprincipled villain who was plainly seeking to enmesh our sweet Diana with his reincarnation snares? Not for the entire Universe!

And the rabbits beheld middle-age stumbling after youth — middle-age breathless, perspiring, and in considerable pain; obstinately refusing to smile, to harmonise with the scenery, to give ear to an inner voice that kept urging him to be himself.

How long did it last? I would, for the vindication of my self-respect, that I could count its duration in hours. As a matter of fact, it lasted only minutes — and very few at that. Yes, before we reached the pinewood, a distance of perhaps a quarter of a mile, the

rascal had wooed and won me from smouldering antagonism to complete concord; and that which made his victory more complete was the rather comforting assurance that this softening process was, on his part, no conscious or premeditated course of action. No; he was simply himself — embodied joy. And as I felt his influence stealing over me, warming and intoxicating as wine, all my old, glad, sympathetic delight in him flooded back like an irresistible, incoming tide. It was unholy magic, of course. But I defy anyone who may read this story to have made a better stand than I.

CHAPTER XXXV

Soon we had reached the shadow-margin of the wood, and the breath of pines, odorous and aromatic as incense, warm and fragrant as the ambrosial breath of a goddess, floated out to greet us.

And, just there, a little incident occurred. It was of no great importance, but, happening just then, and in the way it did, it frankly delighted me, fulfilled as it were my pagan soul's desire.

Standing erect upon the sun-warmed pine-needles, the fairy-man stretched out his arms and prayed to Pan. The graceful act was performed out of spontaneous gratitude, I believe, and because he felt Pan to be the tutelary genius of the place. I was interested, but not astonished. The invocation seemed to be as natural to my companion as breathing. That it was no pose I am prepared to take my oath. Neither did he anticipate ridicule. Had I been told of the incident in city streets, or in some populous haunt of men, I might have scoffed — I hope not, but I might; but there, in that pine-wood, surrounded by noble hills, and within sight of water lustral and shining, the thing seemed natural enough.

The little prayer appealed to me immensely. Nothing could have been simpler, or indeed more appropriate. He hailed Pan as the presiding deity, referred to himself and me as mortal wayfarers, and expressed a hope that the divine gladness of the god might find an undying echo in our hearts.

The scene stamped itself indelibly upon recollection. I look back upon it even now with infinite pleasure.

I like to think of old pagan Pan listening to the young resonant voice, wafted to him along some shadowy transept of forest pines, listening and smiling at this proof that even amid the clash of other creeds he was not forgotten.

Having offered up his little impromptu prayer, my companion turned to me and said, smiling:

"I think that's all?"

I assented. Upon which we quitted the wood, and resumed the upward path.

Gaining the summit of the pass, which, though an eminence, was overlooked on all sides by naked hills, a wide prospect unfolded itself below. We stood on a rise, heather-covered and rock-bestrewn, a natural point of vantage commanding in its entirety a vast amphitheatre. The scene was both wild and striking. Hills formed the rim of the great mountain-cup, hills far off, sweeping gradually upward to where barren and serrated ridges fretted the blue. It could not have been less than five miles in circumference. A burn of considerable size crawled from its farther end, draining its slopes. We could see the flash and gleam of the water as the sun smote it; but the hoarse music, doubtless loud in the valley, came to our ears faint as the softest whisper. The air, sweet and scented with a wild fragrance, breathed upon us, pure and invigorating, a pleasure to draw deep into the lungs.

The sun, shining from an unclouded sky, filled this great cup with gold. The solitude, the silence, the peace, spoke straight to the heart. It was old as the everlasting hills of which it formed a part. Man had not marred it. The fret and fever of humanity had passed it by. No sign of life was to be seen, save distant sheep, small, sturdy, and wild-eyed as deer, cropping the niggard turf between the bracken.

The fairy-man and I stood upon our little hill, gaz-

ing downwards. We spoke no word. It seemed to me we were spectators at a play, arrived, perhaps, a little too soon. A hush and sense of expectancy were in the air, breathless as the moments of anticipation before the curtain is rung up.

I looked at the fairy-man. I often looked at him out of curiosity, or rather out of interest to see what effect the scenery would have upon his responsive spirit. I was never disappointed. It was as though Nature and he conversed together in a language whose alphabet I had never learned.

Upon this occasion, he was gazing into the shining haze that shrouded, ever so faintly, the mighty flanks of the hills. Into his face had come a rapt, yet dreamful expression, the expression of one who soaks his soul in beauty.

Suddenly, as I looked at him, he started. His strange faunlike eyes flashed from abstraction to alertness, and he inclined his head in the attitude of one who listens.

"What is it?" I asked.

"S-s-h-h!" he commanded, and again he fell to listening with manifest delight. I too listened. But for me the silence was unbroken, the peace undisturbed.

A breathless exclamation caused me again to look at my companion. His excitement had redoubled. He was quivering now. His eyes had expanded. They gazed at a hillside, not far distant. They appeared to travel along an expanse of grass and bracken that sloped upwards from the water's edge. They glowed with all the eager, intelligent interest of eyes that note and follow. This time there was no longer room for doubt. He not only *heard,* but *saw!* What? I could not tell. I could not even surmise. For me, the slopes were tenantless, save for the scattered sheep, tenantless as on the first morning of creation.

"What is it?" I insisted again, beginning to share his excitement.

"There!" he whispered, and pointed.

I stared eagerly in the direction he indicated. Nothing. Still nothing. I was sensible of disappointment.

His face was shining now. I could stand it no longer. I seized him by the arm. I shook him.

"What?" I kept on insisting — "What?"

"Look, look there!" he cried.

I concentrated all the will-power in my body into the determination to see.

"I can't!" I cried. "I can't see. There's nothing there. You're dreaming! I don't believe — "

But, even as I voiced my unbelief, the words were cut from my lips, for, on the hillside, straight in the line of his pointing finger, I saw the sheep break and run; and still, as his finger slowly travelled the sunlit slope, again another flock of grazing sheep started, broke, and ran.

I stood astounded. For the moment, all unbelief had gone. It seems extraordinary to me now. But, as I stood there, thrilling with excitement, I *knew* that something traversed the hillside like the wind of the spirit — something swift and strong, at whose coming the bracken waved and the sheep fled — yes, for the moment I knew it as incontestably as though I had seen it myself.

Before I could recover, the fairy-man had gone. He left me without a word. I made no attempt to follow. Running at top speed, he descended the hillside with leaps and bounds. I watched him, divided between amazement and admiration. No hunted stag could have excelled him in grace of movement. Reaching the burn, he sprang across it, and began to breast the further hill. He was going more slowly now, and twice I saw him stop to wave — not to me, but to someone

or something I could not see. Far up the slope, he halted. Considerable as was the distance that separated us, I could still follow his movements. He appeared to be speaking, for he gesticulated with his right hand in a manner which I knew to be his when under excitement. Then, he appeared to be listening — and, anon, he appeared to be singing.

To me, watching breathlessly from my hill-top, all this was utterly incomprehensible. I felt as though in a dream, so strongly did the happenings of which I write partake of the strangeness and unsubstantiality of a vision — the great, lonely amphitheatre; the shimmering slopes; the quivering, golden air; and the one solitary figure suggesting by its movements all the mystery, all the fascination of the unseen.

He returned to me slowly. When he had come within earshot, I heard his voice, singing.

But though his feet carried him up the hillside, and even to the rock upon which I was standing, yet his mind was plainly otherwhere.

Still he continued to sing, a song without words, that to me, wondering, guessing, dimly groping, seemed somehow to represent the extraordinary encounter that had apparently taken place. All I know for certain is that, for a considerable time, I listened to him spellbound. To give a sufficiently strong impression of my captive state of mind, I have only to state that not till later did the absurdity of the situation come home to me.

When at last he fell silent, my curiosity could no longer be restrained. Eagerly, still under excitement, yet exercising as much tact as I possessed, I plied him with questions. What had he seen? Why had he run from me without a word? Where had he learned that song, so simple, yet so full of strange, incomprehensible joy?

It may have been — it must have been — that either into my questions, or my attitude, there had crept some chilling shade of incredulity, of scepticism. I cannot say that I was conscious of it myself, yet I can well believe it to have existed, so loath is the mind of man to accept as fact that which transcends his own immediate experience.

Be that as it may, the altered manner of the fairy-man informed me at once of my mistake. For the first time in my knowledge of him he showed himself reticent, uncommunicative. Faunlike, he receded before my advances into some brake of silence, and, considering him in this new light, I was made profoundly aware of the impassable gulf that lay between his nature and my own.

Never shall I forget the way he looked at me as he eluded my interrogations. It was as though his curious eyes, faintly smiling, were entreating me still to like him in spite of his unwillingness to satisfy my curiosity.

Rebuffed, disappointed, a little sore, I, too, fell silent. In no mood now to be credulous, I fortified myself with common-sense. He had plainly imagined it all, so of course he could not tell me. The scattering of the sheep was pure coincidence. As for the song, he had possibly heard it before, or had composed it on the spot — musicians, as well as poets, have moments of unaccountable inspiration.

Thus I argued, but I argued against something that would not be convinced. And when, later, we proceeded on our way, and I followed the fairy-man through the heather and over the rocks, I seemed to feel that the lonely hills had acquired for me a new and wonderful significance, and that the silence, so meaningless before, was now full of inaudible song.

CHAPTER XXXVI

My heart was sorrowful. Time had conspired against me, and, finding summer sunshine and human happiness favourable for swift flight, had taken advantage of these conditions. The days, so many in anticipation, had become so few in retrospect. The things one had planned to do mocked at the things one had done. I suppose when we leave life we shall feel much the same as when the summer leaves us.

The above lugubrious reflections were inspired by the distressing fact that on the morrow Gamine was going away. I think I must have a great deal of Pam in me. I certainly every now and then catch glimpses of myself in her, as in a small but flattering mirror. Pam positively hates guests to leave us. It plunges her into profound depths of woe, from which only the promise of picnics or the presence of sweets can bring her once more to the surface. However coolly she may have visualised their arrival, when the black day of their departure dawns, Pam's warm tears are not to be restrained. When we talk it over — which we always do, seeking mutual consolation — she becomes the spokeswoman of our feelings. "You see, Daddy, we've come to love them, so it isn't fair of them to go away, is it?" A question to which I reply promptly and passionately in the negative. If my little Pam and I had our will, we should be joint possessors of a house much larger than an hotel, and full to overflowing with guests who have never gone away.

The Mountain was leaving us too. By a singular coincidence he and Gamine were not only taking their

departure on the same day, but also by the same train. Poor Gamine! and, especially, poor Mountain!

Knowing what hopelessly incongruous fellow-travellers they would make, I could not repress a chuckle when I pictured their mutual consternation. A less tactful woman, and a less courteous man, would have backed out of it. But not Gamine — not the Mountain. They faced the awkward situation with the calm of martyrs. Never had I admired them more.

Mary — whose attention I drew to the vagaries of chance — appeared to be infinitely amused, not so much at the singularity of the coincidence, as at my sympathetic attitude.

"Jack," she asseverated, "you'll kill me one of these days."

I looked at her. Laughter "holding both his sides" had taken up his residence within her breast. She was all dimples. I, too, was amused; though, to prolong the jest, I feigned a seriousness. As a student of human nature, what Mary finds, or does not find humorous is always of great interest to me. It is like learning a new language. If — as some philosopher has said — "Know thyself" is the beginning of wisdom, then "Know thy wife" ought to be the beginning of matrimony.

Upon this occasion — as I had foreseen — my gravity redoubled her mirth. When able to speak coherently, she said that she would tell me something that would surprise me. She was as good as her word.

"Is this your doing?" I demanded, with as near approach to severity as I could assume. The meekness of her negative struck me as suspicious.

"Taking her to Loch Doine!" I ejaculated. "A picnic! In the boat! Why, that's a whole afternoon affair!"

She nodded. Her eyes danced.

"But —" I remonstrated; "he must be mad."

She murmured something about "method"—a worn-out quotation. I became excited.

"He doesn't know what he's letting himself in for! He'll never be able to stand it! And she—why, it's simply asking for trouble!"

"She's sweet," mused Mary aloud. "I like her ever so much better than I thought."

There was a soft and pensive expression in her eyes. While fully recognising its charm, I made no pretence of understanding it.

"Isn't it exciting?" she sparkled suddenly; then, with great satisfaction: "Dear, old Jack, I love your puzzled face."

"Puzzled? Not at all. I can see perfectly plainly what they're up to, poor ostriches."

Being encouraged to continue, I did so. Mary listened, still with the same air of mock humility—but I noticed with secret anxiety that her eyes danced more joyously than ever.

"And you think," she gurgled, "that they're doing this for our sakes?"

I bore witness to the belief that was in me. "It's clear as glass," I finished up. "Bless 'em both!"

Mary's eyes embraced me. Almost might a spectator have thought that I was a child—her youngest son. Before I had time to be dignified, she came close, she drew my head down to her level with both hands, and, kissing me lightly on the forehead, whispered, "Old bat."

It naturally fell to my lot to accompany these self-sacrificing guests to the boat. There were numerous baskets and bottles and cushions and rugs and hampers. In addition to his share of the aforementioned articles, the Mountain was laden with the oars. It struck me, from the weight of the baskets, that they were taking a good deal to eat. This forethought had my whole-

hearted approval. They would require all the support they could get.

I looked at the Mountain, as he preceded us across the little meadow that lay between the house and the loch. Considering his long series of successes against feminine encroachments, I could not but marvel. "*Que fait il dans cette galère?*" I murmured inwardly. Impassive as ever, he presented an unmoved appearance to the world. But I, who could read his bachelor heart, read also in his rugged face that expression which the consciousness of a duty heroically undertaken is said to bestow.

Which of the ladies had coerced him into a situation at once so delicate and so difficult? Despite her denial, I still suspected Mary. Theoretically the soul of truth, I feared that in the cause of Romance she would scorn to be limited by facts. Though why on earth Mary should want to play her admirer this trick, I could not for the life of me imagine.

We men being hopelessly in the minority, and being surrounded from birth till death by a common peril, it behoves us to stand shoulder to shoulder. Thus I reflected, and it was the result of this solemn reflection that induced me to warn the Mountain, even at this, the eleventh hour.

My opportunity came when he was in the boat-house, for Gamine waited for us outside.

"The simple life," I commented not without irony. "I hope you've forgotten nothing."

"Hope not," grunted the Mountain, wrestling with luncheon baskets.

"Aren't you going to take anything to read?" I asked, knowing his tastes.

"No," he muttered, rather shamefacedly, then fell to arranging assiduously cushions in the stern-sheets.

I passed him several objects of a bulky and luxurious

nature which he stowed away with, what seemed to me, simple reverence. I chafed. Time was passing, and nothing of a warning description had passed my lips. He was about to shove off, when I stopped him.

"Be careful," I whispered meaningly.

"I'm all right," he answered with characteristic impassivity — "quite used to boats — safe as a barge."

"Is it!" said I grimly, and still speaking under my breath. "I'm by no means sure of that. It strikes me that you'll soon be in a position of considerable danger."

Boat-hook in hand, he stared blankly at me. In the dim, green light of the boat-house, judging by our whispers and air of profound secrecy, we might have been conspirators.

"Danger?" he breathed, alive at last to the necessity of remaining unheard by the lady.

I nodded.

"But —" he blurted; then with a rush: "Why didn't you tell me before?"

The justice of this accusation gave me pause. Most assuredly, as a man and a brother, I ought to have warned him earlier.

"Hush!" I cautioned him, for his voice had risen.

But he would by no means be hushed. Again he demanded why he had not been told before. Not only that, but he gave it as his opinion that the lady ought to know. That, no doubt, was the reason of the return of his powerful voice. He flung himself into the sudden realisation of danger with all the horrible thoroughness of his disposition. He became seriously upset, not — as he explained, and as I fully believed — for his own sake, but for the sake of the lady.

Unable to stem the torrent, I was at my wits' end when Gamine appeared. Her "what's the matter?"

filled the cup of my bitterness. Throwing all caution to the winds, I addressed the Mountain indignantly:

"You see what you've done! Have it your own way: it's the last time I'll try to save anyone."

"Save?" ejaculated Gamine in bewilderment.

"It leaks," explained the Mountain.

"It doesn't," I contradicted.

That appeared to be the climax, for both stood before me speechless. Then the Mountain erupted:

"Then, what on earth did you warn me about?"

I could have trodden on his toes with joy—I could have kicked him anywhere with satisfaction—but under the immediate eye of Gamine I was reduced to impotence. That sparkling orb, along with its sister luminary, glanced from me to the Mountain, and from the Mountain to me. Together they reduced me to guilty transparency, aye, and took a subtle and secret pleasure in the process. Her faint smile appeared innocuous as milk, it exhaled simple gratitude.

"Warn?" she repeated softly. "How kind of you, Jack."

I could perceive that the Mountain, though considerably at sea, looked upon her (to carry on the nautical metaphor) both as his compass and his anchor.

Then, as I stood dumbfounded, she turned to her new admirer and wondered casually if her nice, leather, travelling cushion was waiting to receive her. A moment later the penitent Mountain was to be seen striding towards the house.

"Why wouldn't you let me go?" I asked uneasily.

But she gave it to be understood that a few last farewell moments with me was a pleasure that she could not bring herself to forgo. Even while common-sense adjured me to disbelieve her, my native vanity whispered that it was just possible. I found myself smiling.

The picture she made standing there on the slippery

planks of the old boat-house delighted the eye. Nothing as white, as dainty, as composed, and as desirable had, I felt sure, ever graced a boat-house before. She was all softness and smiles and pretty manners, and a faint odour of expensive perfume.

"You meant it as a compliment," she said with a slight mocking intonation that almost turned it into a question. I preserved a discreet but uncomfortable silence. She patted my arm. I felt better. She began to talk to me soothingly, confidentially, almost caressingly. She said all the gentle, coaxing sort of things one would say to a fractious invalid, or an elderly husband. More and more did I become convinced that I owed her an apology. She accepted it with the utmost graciousness. The bonds of my slavery were tightened. For two pence I would have offered to chuck the Mountain overboard and take his place.

This base suggestion being laid before her, she intimated with a smile that such extreme measures would not be needful just yet, but that it was so nice to know that she could rely on me.

I hoped with extreme pessimism that she would have a good time. She hoped so, too, with an expression that made a forlorn hope of it on the spot.

"You can always sleep," I suggested to console her.

"So we can," she acquiesced brightly. "What a brain you have, Jack!"

I made a smiling and deprecatory rejoinder. Then I whispered:

"I know why you're doing this, Gamine."

Her eyebrows arched delicately.

"I told Mary. She thinks — but never mind what she thinks. What I said was 'Tact and self-sacrifice — for our sakes — their contribution to the general harmony.' That's what I said, and, by Jove, I meant it!"

My voice warmed. It was the equivalent of a grateful handshake.

I believe Gamine was moved. She looked long at me with deeply inscrutable eyes. Was she smiling, or was she not?

"Pam"—I remarked to my daughter ten minutes later, when she and I stood on the little landing-stage gazing after the receding boat—"Pam, my dear, when you grow up, never try to take in your old Daddy. I warn you solemnly that it will be useless. What he doesn't know about women—"

"Isn't worth knowing," murmured Pam by heart.

CHAPTER XXXVII

I SUPPOSE I must have fallen asleep, for I was recalled to terrestrial existence by the sweetest reminder of life — a woman's lips on mine. That the woman was small, that the kiss was of the butterfly order, and that the episode appeared to afford her amusement, did not detract from the pleasure I experienced.

"Hullo!" I said; and, sitting up with a jerk, I endeavoured to adjust my thoughts to my surroundings.

"Lazy Daddy! Did he think I was a fairy?"

"Fairies don't kiss. They rub noses. Where's everybody?"

I was informed that Mummy had returned to the house. It is wonderful how children seize upon the essential in life's relationships. Mummy, in Pam's mind, *is* everybody to me.

It was all coming back. We had had a picnic. The sun had been hot, and my bed beneath the pines too comfortable.

The sun was still warm, but his beams, shorn of their strength, had now a westerly slant. He lit up the clump of great pines under which Pam and I were seated, dyeing their gnarled and corrugated stems with wine-red colour. Gradually withdrawing his mantle from our own familiar hill that shoulders the blue just above our house, he still allowed its golden fringe to sweep the little loch, and to crown with glory the steep opposing slopes.

Tiny, crusading gnats piloted their little barques upon this illimitable sea of light. Faint and wandering perfumes floated invisible. Peace, deep and all-pervad-

ing, interpenetrated nature. Not a sound ruffled the silence, save, from far off, the voice of our little burn singing to itself some old and simple melody of the hills.

"Mummy says will you carry these home," and Pam pointed to an iron tripod, a large kettle, a few rugs, and an assortment of baskets.

I raised my eyebrows.

"I do think," I grumbled, "that that lazy fairy-man—"

"He's not lazy at all," flashed Pam loyally.

"I don't call dancing not being lazy," I demurred. "I could dance till Doomsday with Diana for a partner."

"What's Doomsday, Daddy?"

I sighed. We were getting away from our subject. But, it being one of my paternal principles that Pam's questions must be answered soberly and with an eye to increasing her knowledge, I explained that Doomsday was the day on which, according to the most reliable authorities, the last trump would be blown.

This literally made Pam sit up. In fact, she became as stiff and full of wonder as an exclamation.

"Oh, Daddy! How fearfully exciting! Will it be soon? But, of course, it must be, if you and Diana will still be dancing. Mummy often talks of trumps. Shall we be sure to hear it in Balquhidder?—and shall we all go to Heaven in a party?"

Before even one truthful and improving answer could be framed, Pam's mind had switched back to the subject that had first engrossed her.

"I'd love to dance till Doomsday, too," she sighed enviously. "But Mummy wouldn't let me take off my shoes and stockings—you heard her, Daddy. Diana doesn't catch cold. She looked sweet dancing with bare legs. What did the fairy-man want her like that for?"

I hesitated. Was it advisable to enlighten Pam as to the alleged memories of purely mythological festivities responsible for the partial disrobing of the dancers? I thought not.

"Didn't you hear me, Daddy?"

"Yes, Pam. You needn't raise your voice. I suppose he thought she would look nicer that way."

"Nicer? I never thought of that. Would Mummy look nicer? Have you ever seen her dance with bare legs, Daddy?"

But I wriggled out of that by remarking that Mummy wasn't Diana.

"The first time you met Mummy was at a dance, wasn't it, Daddy?"

I smiled an affirmative.

"How lovely! Tell it me all over again, and don't forget what you had for supper, and what she wore, and what you said to her."

I did my best, but found her critical.

"You've changed it. You've left out about the meringues. Is that all you said? Didn't you talk about me?"

My negative astonished her, until she remembered that God couldn't spare her until some little time after our marriage.

I had hoped for a little relaxation, but, her imagination having been inflamed by that wild woodland dance, she could not be induced to quit the subject.

"What can a lady do when a gentleman forgets to ask her to dance, Daddy?"

"And what can a gentleman do," I encountered, not without soreness, "when a lady refuses to dance with him at all?"

No sooner had the gentleman given vent to his wounded feelings than he was consoled by a little arm being flung tightly round his neck.

"You know I love dancing with you, Daddy, when there's no one else there."

I thanked her. She continued:

"Only you know you haven't got bare legs; and you can't sing as we dance — at least, it upsets us fearfully if you do — and you can't make Diana do things she's forgotten and feels shy about — and you can't see —"

"Pam!" I cried reproachfully.

"I'm sorry, Daddy."

I forgave her. Thereupon she seated herself demurely upon the stump of a bygone pine. With her knees close together, and her little brown hands tucked between them, and her elfin figure, and her child's intent and serious face, she looked like one of the fairies I was unable to see.

"Seven o'clock," I remarked, after consulting my watch. "What do you usually do at this hour, Pam?"

This question, though obviously far from humorous, was yet responsible for an explosion of mirth — an adorable sound.

"Well?" I smiled.

Still savouring the jest, she confided to me that as a rule seven o'clock saw her not only indoors, but in her bath.

"Great Heavens!" I cried, "and your mother —?"

Pam placed a finger-tip on her dewy lips.

"But —" I expostulated. "This will never do. You'll be getting me into hot water simply by not getting into it yourself. What's Diana thinking about?"

"The fairy-man, Daddy."

"The — Oh, confound him! I might have known. This sort of thing will turn my hair grey."

"It is grey," said Pam.

"Where are they?" I demanded.

Pam cast a dispassionate glance at the scenery, then

gave it as her opinion that goodness alone knew. No sooner had she said this than she burst forth: "Daddy, you needn't be anxious. He loves her."

With an exclamation entirely unsuited to juvenile ears I leapt to my feet. Pam, exhorted thereto, admitted that when last seen they were walking straight into the wood, very close together. The rules of hide-and-seek, and more particularly the fact that the fairy-man had put her on her honour not to look up until he called, had effectually prevented her seeing more.

"He never called at all," she added in a tone of deep disillusionment.

"Then you ought to be hiding your eyes still," I said gravely, and, to point my moral, I told her of the Roman soldier found in his sentry-box among the ashes of Pompeii.

"But I wasn't in a sentry-box," she objected earnestly.

"And," she continued with feeling, "I don't think it was a nice way to play."

"It certainly was not playing the game," I admitted.

"But I'm sure he didn't mean to cheat."

"Mean!" I snorted. "The Devil only knows what he means! Come on. We've got to find them at once."

Barely, however, had we taken a dozen steps than we were riveted to the ground. The sound of a scream floated to us from far off, and in the sound there was fear.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

In a flash the whole atmosphere of the scene became weighted with suspense.

"Diana!" gasped Pam, pressing close to me, and I felt her little body tremble. She voiced my fears as well as her own.

"In the wood?" I surmised, with both eyes and ears on the alert.

"No, up there!" and she pointed to the hill with a finger that shook.

"Hush!" I whispered, laying a hand on her shoulder. "Listen."

We both listened, but the scream was not repeated.

"Wait here," I commanded, hardening my heart to her entreaties. I started at a run.

"There!" shrilled Pam. "There she is!"

Even as she spoke, I, too, caught sight of Diana far up the hill. But not of Diana only.

For a moment I stood still, all my senses absorbed to the point of stupefaction. After that one terrible scream I know not what I expected, but certainly not this insensate flight, not this mad pursuit.

The hill sloped to the west, and in the golden fire of the departing sun every detail of its rock-bestrewn and heather-bedecked flanks was plainly visible.

I have heard of a crowd of people watching the drowning struggles of a man from the end of a pier, so horribly intent upon the drama being enacted before their eyes that they stood fascinated and unable to render assistance. Something akin to that benumbing

spell was upon me at that moment. Would he catch her? Would she escape?

That she was frightened, needed no second glance; her unbound and streaming hair, added to her desperate speed, were proofs sufficient. That she could run far better than the majority of girls I knew well, but that she could hold her own with the fairy-man, and that over difficult and indeed perilous ground, I could not have believed possible.

And at that a sudden anger released me from inaction, and, shouting to the terrified girl, I ran forward to meet her.

My nearing presence was not without its effect, for Diana, catching sight of me at last, ran directly towards me. Her headlong course took her towards a bed of bracken — a luxuriant growth of giant fronds. I feared it would stay her, but, plunging desperately in, she struggled through, and, gaining open ground, neared me rapidly. Her pursuer, however, was gaining on her. He cleared the bracken in a series of wonderful leaps, and was within half a dozen yards of her when she rushed up to me.

What wonder that I was indignant with him! How could a man with a scrap of decency in him be so insensible to the feelings of a panic-stricken girl? But I was bewildered as well as angry.

My bewilderment will, I am sure, be fully understood when I state that the fairy-man was laughing as he ran. Yes, to such an hilarious extent that it seriously retarded his speed; fully accounting for the otherwise amazing fact that he had failed to capture Diana before she reached me. There was something so uncanny in the quality of his laughter — so elemental (to quote Gamine) — that it caught at the breath and even awoke a thrill of superstitious awe.

To me — hurrying up the hill, anxiously watching

their swift approach — it recalled that in him which had chummed with Oreads, and had hastened to intercept the flight of a viewless presence among the hills.

What had he found in Diana to give rise to conduct so strange, so disconcertingly familiar, so lacking in all sense of fitness or decorum? According to Pam, they had disappeared side by side into the wood. But that must have been a full hour ago. What had happened since? I did not know — I could not even guess.

I can see him now quite plainly as he appeared to me then — covering at racing speed the last fifty yards — his lean, athletic figure; his dark face, blazing with a sort of jovial excitement; his mouth open in uncontrolled merriment, a gleam of shining teeth. Wonder held the spectator speechless — wonder at the amazing vigour and elasticity of his movements, at their unerring precision as he leapt lightly from rock to rock, or cleared the larger obstacles in his stride. No hat covered his dark head. The western sun fell full upon him, lighted up the sunburnt tan of his face, flung his leaping shadow along the hillside. There was a tempestuous triumph in his swift and sunlit rush.

Clinging to me tightly, with both hands, Diana had so manœuvred as to place my body between herself and danger. As she rushed up to me, there had been something singularly wild in her appearance — her frantic speed, disordered dress, and streaming hair imparting to her the air of a mænad. But, once within my protection, the clutch of her hands and the panting of her breath alone reminded me of her presence. It was upon her pursuer that I turned, and, with as much breath as was left to me, demanded in no measured terms what the devil he meant by his outrageous conduct.

I can smile now at the remembrance of the spectacle

he presented; but I was far from doing so then. From the distance of a few feet he was looking at the pair of us with a most curious expression. His laughter had ceased, but upon his mobile lips hovered an uncertain smile. It reminded me of a dog, or young child, detected in wrongdoing. Ingratiating, but by no means assured, it was as though he were uncomfortably aware of my displeasure, wished to propitiate me, and yet was totally at a loss to account for my hostility.

"How dare you — frighten her like this — how dare you?" I panted, irritated, rather than soothed, by his assumption of guilelessness.

At that his smile faded. He looked at me sideways. He began to scrape at the ground with the toe of his boot.

"Why are you making such a fuss? It's nothing," he muttered sulkily.

"Fuss! Nothing!" I nearly shouted. "D'you call it nothing — treat a lady like this. Didn't you see? She was terrified — trying to escape. Nothing! By Jove! Good thing I was here — mere accident too."

The puzzled expression on his face deepened.

"You — you don't understand," he protested, stretching out an open hand. I continued to glare at him. Confound the fellow, he certainly had me there! but I had no intention of admitting it.

"Umph!" I grunted. "I understand quite enough — too much."

"She was bound to run away," he explained earnestly.

"Why?" I demanded, forced at last into betraying astonishment.

He thought for a moment before he answered; then, with great simplicity, he murmured: "They all do."

"They all —" I repeated blankly. "Who?"

His strange eyes sought the hill, now dim and mys-

terious in dying sunlight. There was a quick, expectant look in their green depths. I, too, flashed a glance at the hill, half expecting to see what he was so obviously looking for, but its naked loneliness told me nothing.

"What is it?" I ejaculated.

He turned again towards me. He shook his head. "You see—" he said wearily. "I knew you couldn't understand. You come near, but not near enough. Diana understands."

Diana! His assurance in referring to her at all staggered me.

"Look at her," he said, and again he smiled.

In sheer bewilderment I obeyed.

The moment my eyes rested on her, I knew that something had happened — something very undesirable, and which I would have given a great deal to have prevented. She was gazing at him over my shoulder. All signs of fear had passed away. In her eyes, upon her slightly parted lips, in her whole transfigured expression, I read the rebirth of fascination. Not only did she bear him no ill, but she even faintly reflected his smile. She was inconsistency personified. It was incredible. I was dazed. And there was more. In her smile there lurked a touch of coquetry, a suspicion of triumph. It was as though, finding herself safe, she were laughing inwardly at the futility of his efforts to capture her. So foreign to the girl I knew did this expression appear, that, moved by sudden consternation, I looked closer. My fears were fully confirmed. Clearly shining in the blue depths of her eyes I recognised the presence of something that was not Diana.

And then, all at once, I remembered Pam. She had, of course, seen and heard everything. What her young intelligence had made of it I had no means of ascertaining, but that she should be mixed up with an episode so regrettable distressed me very much.

"Pam," I said in confusion, "take Diana home."

It was not till I had spoken that I wondered if this reversal of their rôles would add to Pam's youthful astonishment. But, even if I had foreseen this undesirable effect, I could not well have acted otherwise. Pam at all times could confidently be entrusted with Diana, but Diana at that particular moment was no fit guide for Pam.

"I say, let's follow her!"

I started, scarce believing my ears; yet it undoubtedly was the voice of the fairy-man. He was gazing after Diana's receding figure with eagerness. His expression told me that she was drawing the heart of him after her, down from the sunset hill into the twilight of the wood. I looked at him askance. It was at that moment that I realised how unavailing had been my anger. Incredible as it may appear, he seemed to have entirely forgotten his culpability and my displeasure. His preposterous proposal — which amounted to no less than that we should pursue Diana together — broke from him impulsively, conceived in a pure spirit of comradeship and good feeling. As a move, it was diabolically clever. Implying an equal eagerness, an equal speed, it was a flattery most insidious to a man of my years. But I was too old a bird to be hoodwinked. I hardened my heart. I imprisoned him by the arm.

"No," I said grimly. "You stay here."

CHAPTER XXXIX

"TELL me at once, Jack."

"Look here, Gamine, it will soon be time to dress for dinner; and the drawing-room isn't the place for confidences; and you must be exhausted after your strenuous morning with the Mountain; and, besides, nothing conclusive happened at all."

Gamine waited for me to finish with an air of inimitable patience, then gently, but firmly, repeated her request.

Now, I had made up my mind not to tell her. Had it concerned me, personally, it would have been placed before her at once, for there is no opinion I value more than that of Gamine. But it concerned Diana. Quite by accident, as it would appear, I had been the spectator of a scene which I vaguely, but uncomfortably, felt did not redound to Diana's professional credit. For nothing in the world would I utter a syllable that might, by betraying Diana's weakness, give rise to an unfavourable impression.

"I can see quite well there is something," said Gamine.

Reluctantly, I admitted it.

"Something that troubles you."

To that, too, I was forced to acquiesce, though with less reluctance.

"Then why not tell me? I might be able to help."

I looked at her doubtfully. She discounted my glance by a smile of much encouragement. So bright and efficient did she look — such a mine of worldly wisdom — that I hesitated. It was characteristic of her

not only to be aware of my hesitation, but to take instant advantage of it.

"You see, Jack," she coaxed, "it's not as if you hadn't already told me a great deal. And it's not just idle curiosity — don't think it. I take the deepest interest. Besides, I hate to see you troubled. And you know the old saying, 'Two heads are better than one.'"

One of the heads nodded dubiously.

"Especially," she smiled, "if the second head is a woman's."

"I know — I know — but — "

"'But me no buts,'" she quoted brightly. "Now begin."

There was no resisting her. Following her usual piratical custom, she had captured my arm. The actual physical force of her little hand was negligible, but its moral persuasion was irresistible.

She listened to all I had to say with the liveliest interest, which, as I proceeded, deepened into an expression of unusual gravity. When I had made an end of speaking, she fell into a brown study. I waited anxiously. Suddenly, she spoke.

"Jack, I don't like it — I don't like it at all."

As I said nothing, she went on: "It looks to me as though his power over her was increasing."

"I don't see that — " I objected; "it's not the first time — "

"That's just it; every time makes it easier for him. That dance — you shouldn't have allowed it. His suggestion, I suppose? I thought so. And she objected at first? Then why didn't you back her up?"

"I tried to. But it was two to one. Mary and Pam — they went on insisting. It was done so openly too. It seemed so innocent. I couldn't — "

Her eyes sought the ceiling. "And you call yourself a man!"

That accusation being incontrovertible, I kept silent. She continued:

"Don't you see, it was a well-laid plan, carried on under your very nose. First the dance, to get into touch, to recall the part; for he made her believe they had danced together before, didn't he? Then the hide-and-seek, to shake off poor little Pam. Then he lured her, still under his influence, into the wood, up the hill, away from everyone. Then—"

"Great Heavens, Gamine, what are you insinuating!"

For a moment she looked at me blankly.

"I—don't know, Jack."

"Well, then, you shouldn't—Oh, it's absurd!"

She turned to me, speaking vehemently:

"But her fear? You can't get away from that. Why was she afraid? You see, you can't answer. And what would have happened if she hadn't been afraid? Now, don't scowl. I'm only trying to put things plainly, for her sake. Fortunately, she was afraid—very fortunately. That's a great thing. It may possibly safeguard her again."

I listened, a prey to the acutest anxiety.

"I don't believe it. I won't believe it. He hasn't got it in him. He's like a child. You should have seen the look he gave me—innocent as Pam. Hurt, too. He couldn't understand my anger at all."

But Gamine shook her head.

"What d'you make of his laughter?" she asked, after a silence.

"Laughter? I don't know. High spirits."

Again that doubtful movement of her head. "No, Jack," she said with decision. "No man would hound a terrified girl down a hill, however much he suffered from high spirits. It's something more serious—more alarming."

"What?" I asked, and my anxiety would not be repressed.

"The instinct that makes animals pursue anything that runs away. The odd thing is, he's sufficiently a man to laugh; no animal laughs, you know. But his laughter isn't like ours. It doesn't express the same emotions. He wasn't just amused. He was excited. In a way, he saw red. The amazing thing to me is that you managed to stop him."

"Yes," I mused, "that struck me too — but not till afterwards."

"There you are! That brings us back to our very first opinion of him — elemental."

"That's vague," I muttered uneasily.

"Necessarily. What do we really know of him? Nothing. I'm not superstitious — far from it — but —"

"But what?" I prompted, for she had paused, and had glanced up at me with an air of pretty confusion.

"I — don't — know," she said, and laughed nervously. "He makes me feel funny, that's all. D'you know any more about him than you did on the day he came?"

"Not much."

"There you are! One gets no forrarder. He seems to be open as the day — but is he? He's not like any man I've ever met before. So insensible! Takes your breath away sometimes. Other men — well, I can size them up in two minutes —"

I grunted. She went on:

"And the scraps of information he drops — lurid!"

Gamine looked at the door — listened — then, apparently reassured, whispered meaningly: "*They* — who are they?"

"They? Who?"

"Precisely — they who, according to him, always run away. Who *are* they, Jack? It shows the sort of company he keeps. Don't bite your lip — it's true. I

know you'd defend him if you could, but you can't. He's not my guest, thank goodness, so I can say what I like about him."

"You don't understand," I said, and the moment I had said it, it struck me as peculiar that I had made use of the identical words the fairy-man had muttered at me.

I gazed out of the window, but I was conscious neither of the darkling loch nor of the sombre trees, but of the hill behind our house, the hill I could no longer see. There it was, as it had looked when the fairy-man had cast his quick, expectant glance at it, resplendent, a ballroom awaiting the night, and there, above it, in the green and gold immensity, infinitely remote, twinkled the first of its innumerable candles.

I recalled myself with an effort. "You don't understand the world he usually lives in. You needn't smile — I'm serious. I don't quite grasp it either, but I've got the faintest inkling — the faintest — "

Her light intolerance vented itself in a gesture, sufficiently graceful, I admit, but by no means encouraging to — what I knew she would term — ridiculous fancies. How, for example, could I confide to the proprietor of these shrugging shoulders the impression I myself had received — an impression so vivid as to be almost a memory — that I, too, had witnessed something similar — oh, ages long ago — that from some golden hill-top, haunted by the thin, wild pipes of Pan, I had watched the frantic flight of a nymph, the laughing pursuit of a faun? Would the little lady by my side credit it for one moment? No. It was out of the question.

"I don't consider it respectable," announced Gamine, with amazing propriety. I found myself smiling.

"You can't expect the morals of Mayfair in fairyland, Gamine."

"Fairyland!" She laughed with lenient scorn. "I'm surprised at you, Jack. At your age! I suppose you'll pretend next that '*they*' weren't girls."

"Not in the Pickwickian sense," said I, with a twinkle; then, sobering, "You see, what's real to him isn't real to us — and *vice versa.* I confess it's a mystery; but we're surrounded by mysteries from our cradles to our graves, and still more before the one, and after the other. We ought to be used to mysteries by this time, but the funny thing is we aren't. I suppose it would be funnier still if we were, for that would be an end of the mysteries."

As Gamine appeared to be actually thinking, I went on: "He's lonely sometimes; out of it, somehow; lonely as the last man will be, or as you or I would be if suddenly transported to Mars. It's no wonder (if we accept his statement that he's met her before) that he clings to Diana — one familiar face in a strange and unfamiliar world. By Jove, that's a solution! it explains . . . I say, I don't believe you're listening."

But I was wrong. Gamine is always listening. She can do more things at the same time than any other woman I know; and to prove it she promptly treated me to a little lecture on the folly of credulity. "Surrendering your godlike reason," she phrased it grandiloquently.

While she spoke, with her usual emphatic gestures, I fixed my eyes on her diamond brooch, which seemed to be winking at me in rather a knowing manner. "Possibly — possibly — " I murmured. "And yet, I don't know. I don't feel particularly godlike to-day. And, after all, one must believe something. Wait a minute — let me explain. A present implies a past, and things seen imply things unseen." As she seemed on the point of contradicting this, I hurried on: "There's a jolly

lot we don't understand, and we're all so busy trying to explain the unexplainable to suit our pet theories that none of us will listen to the others. One man says, inspiration; another, indigestion. Both may be wrong; yet both are quite aware there is something mysterious to be accounted for. You, for instance, may put it down to atmospheric impact; while I, in my superior wisdom, may call it animism, a theory — "

"Do you know what you are talking about, Jack?"

"Not in the least, Gamine, but I'm trying to find out. Now, you believe lots you can't prove. So do I. I'd rather believe wrongly than not believe at all. It's theory, of course, but it may be right — it *may*, Gamine. The unseen world, eh? All about us. Fearfully interesting. I'd like to believe in it."

She knitted her brows. "What I don't see," she said disapprovingly, "is how all this nonsense you talk is going to help Diana. For any sake, let's get down to the practical. Either he is a danger, or he isn't. We simply talk in a circle. Anyhow, whatever happens, don't say I didn't warn you."

"*Warn!*" I burst out. "Great Scot, I don't need it! I'm warning myself all the time. I can think of nothing else. I — I'm really frightened, Gamine — for her sake. I'd own this to no one else. There's such a lot I can't understand — inevitable somehow. You know I'm drawn to them both, tremendously. But — how can I tell you? I can't get *at* them — to influence them, I mean. They're away beyond me, on another plane. I'm like a man with his hands tied. I can do nothing. It's damnable!"

Gamine's eyes softened. "Dear old boy!" she murmured, "You're all shaken. I had no idea you were feeling it like this. I do sympathise — just awfully. I haven't helped a bit. I've just piled on the agony. I may be wrong. Perhaps he's perfectly harmless, just

the spirit of joy, as you once said. Jack, was I very horrid?"

"No; never horrid, Gamine."

"I was. I was perfectly beastly. Fancy my being uncharitable to-day!"

I would have asked her why specially to-day; but at that moment the dressing-gong sounded, and she ran out of the room.

CHAPTER XL

No sooner had I parted from Gamine than, at the risk of being late for dinner and thus incurring the displeasure of Mary, I went to say good-night to Pam. The ceremony is as immutable as the laws of the Medes and Persians and a great deal more important. Were it to be omitted — through negligence on my part, or sleepiness on hers — we are both of opinion that something dreadful would happen. Much of the demonstrativeness we have had perforce to bottle during the day becomes unbottled at bedtime; for, the truth is, we bid farewell to each other as clingingly as though we were parting for years.

I found Pam sitting up in her small snow-white bed, with the head of her Teddy-bear reposing on its own side of the pillow.

"You're late, Daddy," she said, looking like a reproachful angel, new-dressed, save wings, for heaven. I apologised.

But there was worse coming. Of course, I know quite well that when a gentleman visits a lady, the one unforgivable sin is to be absent-minded, but there is a vast difference between precept and action.

"Daddy, I've asked you twice for a drink."

When I had replaced the glass on the wash-hand-stand, I became aware that the clear and candid eyes of my daughter were fixed on me with unusual intentness. My suggestion that it was time for her to go to fairyland was treated simply as though I had not spoken.

"Sit here," commanded Pam; then, in alarm: "Not

on Teddy! You'd hurt his feelings. Here, Daddy, here."

I obeyed.

"Put your arm round me."

I complied with the request.

"Now," said Pam with a little wriggle and in a voice of sleepy satisfaction, "tell me all about it, Daddy."

"About what, Pam?"

"You know — what's making you unhappy."

I gazed tenderly at the top of the little dark head snuggling against me, and marveled at its uncanny powers of perception.

"How d'you know I'm unhappy?" I asked, to gain time.

"I can see it. Is it the fairy-man?"

"Well, yes, I suppose it is."

"Don't be angry with him. He was only in fun."

I grunted my scepticism.

"He just wanted someone to play with."

"Funny way of playing!"

"No, not funny at all. You sometimes run after me yourself."

I did not reply. It came to me suddenly that it was just possible that Pam might be right. I was prepared to back her intuitive faculties against those of many a grown-up person. Could I but manage to lay the case before this infant Solomon, without clouding the innocency of her outlook, and could I obtain from her a verdict of acquittal for the fairy-man, I felt that it would go far towards reëstablishing my peace of mind.

"Once upon a time," I began thoughtfully, and at that, within the circumference of my arm, I felt a warm little body stiffen to breathless attention.

I continued: "There was a good and wise king who had a beautiful daughter."

"What was her name, Daddy?"

"It's really immaterial—"

"I don't think that's a pretty name at all."

"Then we'll just call her the Princess—only let me go on. When she was old enough—"

"How old, Daddy?"

"Oh!—ah!—the marriageable age."

"When will I be—"

"When you've learned not to interrupt," said I, with a twinkle.

This being greeted with derisive laughter, I hurried on:

"She was wooed and won by a Prince, a fine young chap, earning good money, and justly celebrated for his sterling common-sense."

"What's that?"

"It's what Mummy's got, but what you and I haven't got."

"I see—brains, Daddy."

"Well, perhaps; certain sort of brains."

"Had the Princess got them too?"

"Sometimes; at least, one half of her."

"Which half?"

"The common-sensible half, of course. Now, listen, and try not to interrupt again, or I'll be late for dinner. One day there came a sort of fairy guest to stay with the good old king—"

"What sort?" demanded Pam brightly.

I groaned. "The wrong sort, Pam. An awful fellow, mad as a March hare, wild as a will-o'-the-wisp, as deaf to the voice of reason as—as Teddy Bear; and yet, somehow, he made everyone love him."

"Did the Princess love him, Daddy?"

"She did, and she didn't."

"I know—half of her?"

"By Jove, you've got it, you little witch! Now, listen — the wise old king was worried to death. He didn't know what to do. You see, the Prince couldn't come to save the other half of the Princess."

"Why, Daddy? Couldn't he afford it?"

"I don't think he knew about it, or he'd have afforded it all right."

"Was he rich? As rich as you?"

"Not quite. You see he was young and hadn't come into his kingdom, but he was saving money to buy a castle close to the railway station at Surbiton. Now, let me get on. The point is that all the worry fell on the good old king. He loved her, Pam. He was all for the absent Prince. What was he to do — chuck the fairy out, or run the risk of his getting a hold of the Princess by the wrong half? Eh?"

"Did her right half not love the fairy, too, Daddy?"

"No, certainly not. You've not been attending properly. I told you distinctly only one half of her thought him beautiful and attractive; the other — and I'm sure the bigger half — loved the young Prince with all its might. The worst of it was — or perhaps it was the best of it — that the fairy frightened that good half horribly. I suppose he wanted it for himself, for he ran after it, but it ran away from him and hid behind the back of the wise old king, who —"

"I know — I know," shouted my listener triumphantly. "It's Diana and the fairy-man. And you are the good, wise king who doesn't know what to do. Oh, you artful old Daddy!"

"Right," I confessed. "Well what d'you think? Eh?"

There ensued a little pause, during which I fixed my eyes on the little head tucked between my jacket and my waistcoat, and wondered what winged words would presently issue therefrom.

"I think, Daddy, that it would be very unkind indeed to — to — yes, chuck the fairy-man out. It would hurt his feelings dreffully, and it would make Mummy and me perfectly miserable. We love him."

"I know. I told you so in my story. So do I really — in a way; but he frightens our beautiful Princess."

"Only a teeny half," assured the child's voice earnestly. "And please don't be unhappy, Daddy, dear, for it's sometimes lovely to be frightened. I even frighten myself sometimes on purpose, and scream like anything — don't you?"

"Never. Besides, that's not the same thing at all."

Pam thought again. "Diana didn't mind really," she said at length. "Not at the time, anyway. She wanted to play with him again, nearly at once. She looked back twice. I had to drag her along, and she's heavy. She was funny, so dancy, and just laughed when I told her I'd be late for my bath. I didn't feel she was our Diana at all, until we got into the house. Wasn't that funny?"

"And then?" I prompted eagerly.

"Then she wouldn't make conversations, and I had to ask her three times for my cup of milk, and when I wanted her to tell me a story about her Prince, she began to cry — at least half of her did, the wet half, I suppose. I know it did, for I tasted tears when I kissed her, quite salt they were, though she didn't blow her nose once."

"Extraordinary," I mused.

"Yes, wasn't it, Daddy? When I cry, my nose cries quite as much as my eyes, even more, I think."

"Did she speak of him?" I asked after a moment.

"Of her Prince, Daddy?"

"No, of the fairy-man."

"No, not exactly; but she jumped."

"Jumped, Pam? Where?"

"Oh, nowhere in particular. I was in my bath and we heard the voice of the fairy-man calling to Mummy, and I cried out, 'Diana, there's our dear fairy-man.' She was soaping my face, and — and — do *you* like soap in your mouth, Daddy?"

"Confound the fellow!"

"Hush! You'll hurt God's feelings, Daddy. And, anyway, I'm sure it's not the fairy-man's fault. He can't help it. Besides, I'll tell you a secret; I believe he's only pretending."

"How d'you know that?"

"He said something — yes, but don't squeeze too hard. I was sitting on his knee — I often do, you know. Why is it that gentlemen's knees are not nearly so comfy as ladies' knees?"

"I know nothing about it. Go on, Pam."

"He said" — the little face tilted upwards — "he said 'Pam, d'you ever say, "Let's pretend"?' and when I said 'Often,' he laughed and said that grown-up people did it just as much as children."

"Ah — and you think — that he and Diana —?"

Pam's little head nodded vigorously.

"I wish to Heaven I could think so. It might help them."

"D'you mean, Daddy, that you wish Heaven would help them?"

"I do with all my heart."

"Well, it will. I know. We only have to ask it. Now, shut your eyes, and we'll pray together."

As I waited obediently with firmly closed lids, the voice of Pam reached me. "Will you pray, or shall I?" it asked.

"You," I decided, and a sigh of satisfaction rewarded my decision.

It is not necessary to record the artless words that were breathed devoutly into my waistcoat, but I am

prepared to swear that, of all prayers offered up in the neighbourhood of Balquhidder that night, none were more remarkable than Pam's petition that Heaven would confine the activities of her governess and my guest to the innocent game of pretending.

CHAPTER XLI

THAT evening after dinner, no one suggesting bridge, we formed a semicircle round the fire.

My mind, fortified by direct communication with Heaven, and elevated by the pure surmises of my daughter, was prepared to note and welcome any sign that would announce that Diana and the fairy-man were only pretending. It was to the former that my attention most readily turned. Pam's account had touched me more than I cared to betray. It had showed plainly how poignantly Diana was feeling the influence of our disconcerting guest. The mere sound of his voice, the mere mention of his name, had had the power to make her cry. It pointed to a condition of affairs that was rapidly becoming intolerable, and yet one to which I did not see my way to put an end.

Gamine, too, was on the alert. Contrary to custom, she made a point of sitting next Diana; and I noticed that from time to time she engaged her in conversation with a veiled sympathy and a vivacious charm of manner that earned my gratitude.

Without seeming so to do, I watched Diana closely. I would have given a great deal to know exactly what was going on inside that fair head bent so assiduously over the piece of needlework. That I was forced merely to conjecture chafed me. Assuredly Diana's thoughts were occupied neither with her extremely domestic occupation, nor with the chatter of the pretty lady by her side. And so potent are outward appearances that I came near to asking myself if I had not imagined the whole scene witnessed that afternoon,

and if it were possible that the hunted creature who had fled to me for safety could possibly be the same person as this impeccable young lady who looked as if she had never done anything less civilised, or less ornate, than adorn the world in evening dress.

Yes, her composure was admirable. For aptness, her replies to Gamine could not have been bettered. The smile she bestowed upon the Mountain, when, with commendable gallantry, he dived beneath the sofa in pursuit of a runaway reel, struck me as being pre-eminently fitted for the occasion. And yet, I was fathoms deep in doubt, for I believed that could I have treated her as I would a box — could I have removed her lid and peeped inside — I should have seen contents so disordered as to necessitate serious rearrangement.

I have said that I was on the lookout for some evidence in support of Pam's theory, but as far as Diana's attitude towards the fairy-man was concerned, I failed to see any signs of pretence. Upon the two or three occasions when he spoke to her, she replied very simply and naturally, but without raising her eyes from her work. The pretending was there, I vaguely felt, but it was not directed at him. Rather was it intended to mislead the rest of the party. Not that there was anything the least consciously deceptive in her attitude, for it was nothing more or less than the time-honoured heritage of her sex, the defensive armour worn by every woman to protect the vulnerable body of her emotions.

And it was while watching her thus unobtrusively, pondering over the puzzle she presented, teasing my brains to discover anything that might lead to enlightenment, that I began to appreciate properly what I can only call the splendid courage of the girl.

Every known fact proclaimed that conclusion. She had confessed to being lonely, and true it was that her

isolation was very real. At every turn her feelings, finding no outlet, were thrust back upon her, and no doubt preyed continually upon her peace of mind. Possessed of a lofty conception of duty, and endowed with a rare sense of personal dignity, she must in her reflective moments have been aware that she had failed where most she ought to have succeeded. That alone must have troubled her profoundly.

But there was more than that. She had confessed to being frightened. I had ample proof of the truth of that confession. Fear was no stranger to her heart. Rather was it her companion by day, her bedfellow by night. A triple fear haunted her — fear of the fairy-man, of herself, and of the unknown. Certainly, when under the mysterious influence of the fairy-man, fear slipped from her — as the memory of sorrow does from a semi-intoxicated man; but it was always there, waiting to take possession when she became her normal self.

And yet another and more important thing. Her love for Gerald was her very life. He was the first and only man who had touched her heart. All her hopes of happiness, present and future, were bound up in him. No one who had heard her speak of her engagement — as I was privileged to have done — could doubt this for a moment. And yet, in spite of her whole-hearted allegiance to her absent lover, she housed a traitor within who was irresistibly attracted by another man. That this false self was beyond her control made the knowledge of its existence no more endurable. And the wonder of her lay in the fact that under this weight of circumstance, so hostile to a quiet mind, she yet had the fortitude to play her part in the comedy of life with composure and even with cheerfulness. What marvel that I recognised and admired her courage?

With two exceptions — Mary and the fairy-man — we were all a little subdued that evening. It was, I think, only to be expected that both Gamine and the Mountain — in their attitudes towards each other, at all events — should evince symptoms of strain, the very natural reaction that must of necessity take possession of people who have been bored to the verge of extinction. I was sorry for them, of course, but even in the midst of my sorrow I was conscious of wicked satisfaction. Had I not prophesied it to Mary? Had I not warned the Mountain? What else was to be expected if guests would neither ask nor take my advice? What *had* happened in that small boat, on that lonely loch, when, helpless, without books, cut off from all human assistance, deprived even of golf clubs, the Mountain had been delivered over by the Fates to the frivolities of Gamine? History did not relate; but to my mind his portentous silence was answer sufficient. Poor Mountain! It would have taken a much more perfect man to have escaped without a scar.

Nor was he alone to be pitied. Gamine, too, had suffered. Half a day of undiluted, unrelieved Mountain! Imagine it! Atlas himself would have begged to be excused. And, judging by her exceptionally subdued manner, he had apparently crushed her butterfly pinions with the very solidity of his worthiness.

What we should have done without Mary, goodness only knows. To be smilingly oblivious of all that I have attempted to describe implies a mental condition which in a hostess is as rare as it is refreshing. I often think that Mary would be incredible were she not a blessed fact. Not a doubt but that upon this occasion she relieved the strain very considerably. We were in desperate need of someone placid and normal and unimaginative; someone who radiated motherliness and good-will; who saw nothing, and yet approved of

everything; who could make nice, comfortable little speeches — like good, warm little dinners — just fitted to fill a vacuum.

In the fairy-man that evening we had an even more striking exception to the prevailing mood. It would, I suppose, be inappropriate to say of him that he was the life and soul of the party — though that is the accepted term — for the simple reason that his life was not as ours, and his soul was an unknown quantity.

I confess that he disturbed me greatly — and no one who has reached the sensible age likes to be disturbed. For example, I flatter myself that I am nothing if not consistent — and lo! this fellow had only to smile at me, and I promptly became more inconsistent than a weather-cock. Moreover, as a host I have followed a certain line of conduct for years. No guest has ever beheld me ruffled; none can boast of having amazed me. And now . . . well, both amazed and ruffled, I glared at him with affection, and listened to him with indignant delight.

It might well be imagined that, after our none too pleasant interview on the hill, and considering that he was in the presence not only of the lady he had treated so cavalierly, but likewise of two fellow-guests both of whom regarded him with suspicion, he would have had the sensibility to show that he felt the oppression of a disapproving atmosphere.

But did he? By no means. There he was, never still on his chair a moment; chatting, laughing, indulging in preposterous flights of fancy; saying sober things in the maddest way, and mad things in the soberest way, till you never knew which was which; making open love to Mary and (I strongly suspected) secret love to Diana very nearly at the same time; appealing confidentially to me, as though, forsooth, I were a collaborator in all his cock-and-bull stories! And as for

talking personalities . . . ! Ye gods! Had his nurse, or his mother, or his tutor never taught him that they were taboo in polite society? But no. What am I saying? I could no more associate him with any one of these instructors to normal childhood than I could imagine Buster in the Eton eleven. Much more easily could I imagine the rascal born ready-made, and adopted by some old satyr on a hill-top, until such time as he was old enough to be let loose — a sort of satyric jest — upon a highly scandalised world.

Yes — there was something uncanny about him, exalted, almost vinous. Had my excellent burgundy anything to do with it? The Mountain was plainly of this opinion, and at a single nod from Mary would have acted as chucker-out, or have essayed so to act, for I should have backed the fairy-man to have chucked out half a dozen Mountains similar to the one fuming in our largest armchair, had such an unnatural band of reproductions attempted to interfere with his personal liberty.

My own opinion is that burgundy had nothing to do with it, though he had punished ours pretty severely, as was his wont. He was quite capable of drinking everyone else comfortably under the table, and walking home afterwards not only sober, but thirsty. No; the folly that flowed from his lips had never been imprisoned in a bottle, nor had it ripened in purple clusters under the kindly sun of France. And yet, he was manifestly intoxicated. As a thought-reader, the following were my conclusions:

"Delightfully high spirits," thought Mary.

"Highly reprehensible," thought the Mountain.

"What next?" thought Gamine.

But what Diana thought remained a mystery.

CHAPTER XLII

No subject of conversation more calculated to make Mary smile, Gamine open her eyes, and the Mountain bristle, could have been chosen. The fairy-man it was who did the choosing; and his choice fell upon the relationship between the sexes.

When first he started this theme, I quaked inwardly. To what brutally direct treatment was this subject so delicate about to be subjected? Would I, as his host, have to burn in blushes, or to silence his indiscretions by sheer force of lung? Calling to mind his proposal to people the hills with unfortunate children, I felt I would as lief listen to Buster's views upon the relationship between the sexes as to those of a creature so insensible to domesticity.

His theory, as far as I can recall it, was that everyone possessed an affinity as well as a counterpart in the opposite sex — that if he married his affinity, he suffered, and that if he married his counterpart he didn't suffer so much.

"Cheerful!" I commented, and then smiled as I exchanged a delightfully understanding glance with Mary.

"Women, of course, do most of the suffering?" remarked Gamine with delusive simplicity.

To this the fairy-man acquiesced; but, from what I knew of him, it struck me that the word "suffering" — save perhaps in the purely physical sense — had in all probability no meaning for him whatsoever.

To impart an elevating and poetical flavour to the discussion, I observed that someone had said that, at

the birth of a child, or a star, there was pain. I would have continued had not Mary's voice distracted me.

"It's only poetry, Harry. Of course you can't expect sense from poetry."

"I do expect it," said the Mountain.

Catching Mary's frown, I said no more; but the fairy-man rushed in where wiser men feared to tread.

"Women are like stars," he murmured, and his green eyes caressed Diana.

"That's why men know so little about them," said Gamine.

"Astronomy . . ." I began with confidence.

"Astronomy . . ." interrupted the Mountain, catching at the word with haste. "Exact science — good — you know where you are."

"Always on the earth," laughed the fairy-man.

"I should hope so," said the Mountain, surveying the jovially mocking face with steady eyes. "The earth is quite good enough for me." He paused, then, catching my eye, added with a twinkle: "It'll last my time."

"Is it necessary to know where you are?" I questioned, slightly amazed to find myself poking fun at him.

Mary it was who answered.

"Of course, Jack. Harry is quite right. It may be extremely important to know where you are. The other night, in the dark, I nearly fell downstairs."

"At all events, you found out where the stairs were, my dear," said I, suppressing a smile. "And that was important. A lost flight of stairs — or, shall we say, the flight of the lost stairs — would upset a home very much. No, I'm not being unsympathetic. I only want to show that people speak too lightly of losing themselves. It's impossible to lose yourself — though quite easy to lose everything else."

Gamine's laugh was full of encouragement; but I found the lady whom my speech most concerned gazing at me with two bewildered brown eyes, whose expression hovered midway between uncertainty and reproach.

As our glances met, something of a satisfactory and explanatory nature did undoubtedly pass between us, for, after bestowing upon me a smile, Mary turned to the others and said:

"Do go on talking about women and stars. It's such a pretty idea."

The Mountain said nothing, but, stealing a glance at him, I chuckled inwardly. His eyebrows had raised themselves — a phenomenon which, when accompanied by a portentous and glassy fixity of the eyeballs, is in the habit of covering his partner with confusion at the bridge-table. Mary, however, in blissful unconsciousness, had again bent her dark head over her work.

"You don't see the resemblance?" I was wicked enough to ask him.

"I do not," came the uncompromising reply, delivered with an air of heavy finality.

"Out of reach?" I suggested.

The moment I had spoken, I wished the words unsaid. They were ungenerous. More, they were in questionable taste. It was assuredly not for me to remind him. Ten years of chivalrous devotion — in fact ever since he had left the Egyptian Civil Service for good, and fallen a victim to the insidious delights of golf. And yet the allusion had been so slight, so subtle, so vastly comprehensive, embracing, as it did, not only the sex, but the stars, that it might well have eluded the observation of a Mountain.

And not that alone. The murmur that had escaped me involuntarily shadowed forth, not so much my convictions as my somewhat nebulous suppositions. Did

he know? — did she know? — and, more especially, did I know? — were questions that, from time to time, gently suggested themselves; remained unanswered, and, passing away, left behind them a faint impress of wonder, interest, and humour.

Undoubtedly the worthy Mountain and I shared something — the influence of a beautiful personality. He, in his honest British way, paid his debt with coin shining and incorruptible. But, in receiving much, did he give all? There existed a doubt. Somewhere, perchance, beneath that rugged exterior there was still to be found a vein of virgin gold, the real wealth of his heart. It was conceivable. And again the questions came: Did he know? — did she know? — and, more especially, did I know?

"All the same, some women give you the impression of starlight," came the beguiling voice of the fairy-man, and again his eyes were resting shamelessly upon Diana.

"One forgets all about the stars when the moon rises," was my contribution, a little votive offering laid gallantly upon the altar of my particular divinity — but the goddess in question was experiencing difficulty in persuading a refractory thread to enter the eye of a needle.

"Very pretty, Jack," applauded Gamine, a little wistfully I thought. "Can't *you* say anything nice and complimentary like that?" she asked with mock severity, apostrophising the Mountain.

Their eyes met. Much interested to see how they would fare in this passage of arms, I awaited his answer. Perhaps she had forgiven him for having bored her, for her eyes rested on his strong, bluntly fashioned face with a challenging softness infinitely provocative and alluring. And perhaps he, too, had recovered, for the unflinching look with which he met her assault and

battery was far from lacking in courtesy, albeit of a somewhat defensive nature.

"I never pay compliments," he rumbled subterraneously; then — Gamine's white shoulders betraying resignation — a smile flickered over his face as he added: "I only think them."

This — coming from a source so unpromising — would have entirely deprived me of breath had I not been extremely dubious as to which lady could legitimately lay claim to be the object of his thoughts. He certainly spoke to Gamine — but then, he looked at Mary. Both were listening. Both smiled. I, too, was smiling. My opinion of the Mountain underwent considerable alteration. "Two birds," I reflected, "with one stony compliment; and not a real compliment, either, only the shadowy thought of a compliment." Metaphorically, I took off my hat to the Mountain. He was a sportsman.

"We're getting away from affinities," said Gamine softly.

"Safest thing to do," I muttered.

This, as I might have foreseen, was more than sufficient to commend the opposite course to the lady.

"I wonder who is my affinity?" she mused.

No one spoke.

"Three men — " began Gamine pityingly.

She was interrupted by Diana.

"Please, won't someone tell us what is an affinity?"

It was the first time she had spoken since we started the discussion, and the effect of this embodiment of maidenly meditation suddenly becoming audible was pronounced. Her question was addressed to the half-circle generally, but the fairy-man it was who replied.

"I am your affinity, Diana."

People talk lightly about bombshells exploding in their midst, yet the phrase fits this occasion.

The declaration burst from him, impetuous, irresistible, irresponsible. The silence that ensued surged with emotion. It throbbed in my ears, creating a palpitating soundlessness through which — unnaturally loud and strangely insistent — the tick of the clock upon the mantelpiece recorded moments of stupefaction. What the others felt I could only guess. My own feelings defied analysis.

And Diana — what of her, poor helpless girl? Startled, fluttered, fascinated, she could do nothing but gaze dimly into the scintillating green eyes that plunged their joyous yet masterful regard into the innermost recesses of her being. Into her face came again the expression of timid and dawning comprehension which I had noticed and feared upon a former occasion. This tremulous rebirth flickered like a flame. It grew and grew until it seemed as if she, too, might suddenly burst into a blaze. And then — to my infinite relief something totally unforeseen happened.

I know not what impulse it was that carried her hand so swiftly to her breast, a gesture instinctive and desperate as that of a drowning man clutching a straw. The moment it rested there, however, a blessed transformation took place. The Diana we knew and loved came back to us. To me, feeling for her an almost unbearable pity, it was as though I had seen her guardian angel whispering into her ear, stiffening every moral fibre to resistance. The recoil of her whole body — a movement stayed only by the solid back of the chair behind her — testified to her inward shrinking from the man at her side. And with that, after one swift, fluttered glance around, her eyes lost their enchanted light, drooped and fell. Over the unnatural pallor of her face rushed the hot colour, the tortured embarrassment of one, naturally modest and retiring, who sud-

denly finds herself occupying an unendurable position under the scrutiny of many eyes.

To the others the movement of her hand probably suggested nothing significant, but to one who knew what that sweet hiding-place concealed, it was illuminating indeed.

Though I had done nothing, — nor, indeed, had had time to do anything, — my thankfulness knew no bounds. Another power was fighting for Diana, a power more potent. The very touch of that little gold locket — the gift of Gerald — had been sufficient to arouse all that was best, all that was most faithful, within the girl's heart. Nothing was said, yet I am sure that everyone but Mary knew that a crisis had been miraculously averted.

CHAPTER XLIII

"It won't come out," muttered the Mountain.

When he said these mournful words, he and I were the sole occupants of my study, for the ladies had retired for the night, and the fairy-man, after thoroughly electrifying the domestic atmosphere of our respectable household, had departed somewhere, though where I knew not, for I really was in no mood to enquire genially which particular hill or wood he had selected for a bedroom.

The Mountain was playing patience. To behold him thus occupied was to witness the incarnation of the beautiful virtue which lends its name to the pastime.

Seated with immense solidity before a table which he could easily have lifted with one finger, he was engaged in turning up card after card with an earnestness, a solemnity, a concentrated absorption that could not possibly have been increased had his valuable life been dependent upon the result.

Nor, I would have you know, was this a compliment to the game in question, for I was certain that had the Mountain turned all the energies of his mighty brain to pitch and toss, or to spillikins, or to guessing what was in my pockets, he would have been equally serious, equally intent.

Pausing by his side, — for I had just got up to fetch the match-box which lay on the mantel-shelf, — I enquired which was the defaulting card.

His voice said, "Ace," but his tone said, "Don't interrupt."

I was sorry for him, for I never allow a guest of

mine to be unhappy if I can help it. Besides, with four good and easily get-at-able aces in the pack . . . No; no; his self-inflicted sorrow was beyond me.

"It ought to be easy enough to produce an ace," I remarked, as I stood by his side, drawing at my newly lit pipe, and looking down through clouds of smoke at the array of cards ranged before him into comprehensible groups.

He grunted, then turned up a queen. The very sight of her seemed to annoy him.

Moving noiselessly, I reseated myself at the other side of the fireplace. Isolated in his halo of lamplight, the Mountain continued to depress himself. At times, I noticed, he was visited by swift and elusive gleams of hope (when he appeared to be playing grab), but, for the most part, a deep and laborious gloom characterised the performance.

I was just thinking, "Heaven protect me from patience!" when a heavy sigh and the sound of cards being swept off the table announced that the ordeal was over for the night. Producing his pipe, my companion proceeded to fill the armchair opposite my own.

For some time we smoked in silence. The Mountain is at his best when silent — almost is he at his best when absent. It is when he ceases to quarry out thoughts that he gives you his most eloquent companionship, for it is then that you can put what construction you will upon his general aspect. It is extraordinary how one becomes accustomed to his appearance; accustomed, I mean, to the point of forgetting it. Not entirely, though. There are still moments when, catching sight of some unusually rugged contour standing out in high relief, some outline too stern for symmetry, too irregular for beauty, one experiences a sort of æsthetic shock. It passes, thank goodness! for even as shimmering mists and

beautiful atmospheric effects soften the irascible moods of the earth, so does the knowledge of many moral excellencies shed its glamour over our own particular Mountain.

These above-mentioned considerations did not upon this occasion occupy my attention, for, as a matter of fact, the presence of my silent companion no more interrupted the anxious train of thought suggested by the events of the evening than did the flicker of the fire.

I had, indeed, all but forgotten his existence, when, suddenly, he reminded me of it. He spoke — and his exhibition of thought-reading amazed me.

"Your governess . . ." said he, and broke off.

Quickly I looked up at him. He was gazing into the fire. A slight film of smoke curled upwards from the bowl of his pipe; and, as I continued to gaze at him, another and still larger puff escaped from his lips. His corrugated brow indicated laborious thought.

"Diana?" I encouraged.

He nodded, but evinced no desire to continue. I pondered. Plainly, the Mountain believed in leaving much to the imagination. Or was it that he was in difficulties?

"That speech . . ." he mused, with a sort of grim and ominous restraint.

It was my turn to nod. His tone was sufficient. We were plainly of one mind. We both disapproved strongly of the declaration of the fairy-man. But the anxieties of the Mountain (if I may call his friendly solicitude by so grave a name) were less acute than mine. He conveyed to me — though how on earth he did it I am wholly at a loss to explain — that he thought no evil, but that his chivalry had been aroused, and his susceptibilities had been shocked — and there you have the mental attitude of the Mountain in a nutshell.

What the effort to tell me this must have cost him, I hardly like to contemplate. Studying him intently, I discerned that he was troubled by three separate things: first, by the fear of interfering — not of being considered interfering; that was a different matter; — secondly, by a strong and secret apprehension that words would fail him when it came to the critical moment, a fear fully justified by events; and, thirdly, by feelings — powerful feelings — delicate feelings — feelings that did him infinite credit — but which it was part of his code of honour never to divulge.

Oh, he was very, very English! Listening with sympathy to his fragmentary utterances, warming myself before the fire of his smouldering indignation, intensely appreciating his bluffness, his honesty, his single-mindedness, I seemed to be giving ear to John Bull at his best. And when, finally, he became completely inarticulate, and took to mopping his face and neck with a very large red-silk handkerchief, I metaphorically threw myself into his arms and embraced him on both cheeks.

Thank goodness, he was unable to read that thought or he would have fled from the room.

One thing, however, still puzzled me. Why had the Mountain spoken? Even making due allowance for his chivalry and his disapproval, there must, I argued, be some other reason, some more compelling, more fundamental reason, that would account for his breaking through one of the inflexible rules by which he lived. I determined to find out.

He swallowed the bait I dangled before him with such celerity, such guilelessness, that I knew shame. Very frankly he confessed that his thoughts were all of Mary.

Mary! My wife! And this man, seated opposite to me in the most comfortable of my armchairs — his

pipe removed from his lips, as though in respect for the announcement he had to make — his countenance burnished to the point of luminosity by vigorous friction with the red-silk handkerchief — led me, Mary's husband, to infer that she was his guiding star!

Of course he did not say so in these words — he was not given to similes. I merely record my private impression. No; guiding star was not the term he used. yet at the moment, I was certainly convinced that I was listening to a declaration, well-nigh as amazing as that of the fairy-man. Almost did the Mountain employ the very words he had so strongly censured in another. Almost, it seemed to me, did he say: "Mary, I am your affinity."

Naturally, the resemblance escaped him altogether. Had he been asked which was the more questionable — to declare yourself the affinity of one man's affianced bride, or to declare yourself the affinity of another man's wedded wife, he would have been shocked beyond measure. So serious, solemn, and deeply in earnest was he that, in common decency, I was forced to listen to him with equal seriousness, solemnity, and earnestness. Inwardly, however, I was far from sharing his gravity. That he should select me for his confidant was a move which, for originality alone, was entitled to the profoundest respect. In all he said — and, more especially, in all he did not say — his rectitude made itself felt, his transparent simplicity, his unswerving loyalty; and, yes, his sublime disregard of all but the principals in his little comedy.

The comic element was, indeed, so pronounced, that I marvelled that the Mountain should remain in ignorance of it — for, after all, he was by no means without a sense of humour. To me, the piquancy of the situation lay in his absolute indifference to anything I might think.

So far, indeed, was he from attempting to ingratiate me, either as Mary's husband or as his host, that he gave it to be understood that the verbal efforts he had made, and was still making, would not have been put forth at all had not Mary's domestic welfare been imperilled.

To have smiled genially upon him (as I was tempted to do) would have been as reprehensible as to have laughed in church.

"I see," I acquiesced gravely.

He was glad I saw; though he had firmly anticipated it, being plainly of the opinion that there was nothing else for a decent chap to do.

"The question now is . . ." I propounded, after we had smoked in silent meditation for a full five minutes. The steady look bestowed upon me was such as a self-respecting man might lavish upon an equally self-respecting ally. Greatly heartened, I resumed: "The question now is — what are we to do next?"

He gave this pronouncement his whole-hearted approval. Its sterling common-sense appealed to him profoundly. I was distinctly conscious of having gone up two rungs in his estimation.

With the utmost seriousness we discussed the situation — at least, I discussed it, while the Mountain listened. His weighty nod, however, the occasional lift of the eyebrows, his rare and exclamatory grunts, made me feel that the great brain behind the kindly eyes was marking, learning, and inwardly digesting every word that fell from my lips.

I cannot say that any conclusive or satisfactory decision was arrived at, though we both agreed that events impossible to predict were toward. Even the Mountain owned that our domestic atmosphere appeared to be unaccountably charged with electricity. He was, however, inclined to account for this meteoro-

logically, gratefully recognising in the weather not only a heaven-sent topic of extreme safety, but also the cause responsible for all humours of the blood and all disorders of the imagination. Otherwise, his attitude was surprisingly similar to my own.

In fact, so comforting and even exhilarating was the knowledge that the Mountain stood solid behind me that I came near to losing every inch of the ground I had gained, simply by giving vent to my feelings.

"I'm glad you spoke," said I with great cordiality, as I rose and proceeded to light my candle. "I say, you don't mind my going to bed? You're all right? The drinks are over there. Don't forget the lamp. Well, good-night, old man."

No sooner had I spoken than I caught at my breath. "Old man!" What a heinously affectionate way to speak to a Mountain with whom one has never even shaken hands. How would he take it? Would he curse me and die? Would he shake the dust of my study from his feet? He did neither. He actually took it smilingly — almost as though he liked it.

CHAPTER XLIV

But I was destined not to go to bed at once upon leaving the Mountain. I was about to do so when moonlight seduced me into the garden. Once there, all drowsiness passed from me, and I had no wish to go indoors.

I gazed entranced. Nothing more ethereal, more softly radiant, can be imagined. The familiar had put on unfamiliarity. Even our house showed strange, its painted face naturally pale, its window-eyes unnaturally bright.

Man cannot but feel an intruder at moments such as these. I had stumbled unaware into some vast temple of Nature, just as the priestess was pouring the white fire of the spirit over rows upon rows of shadowy worshippers. Softly I moved forward, trusting that in some secluded aisle there might be a vacant seat for me.

Happy chance! In the blue shadow of the eastern gable I found a deck-chair. Seated therein, I gave myself up to the spirit of the scene.

I now faced the fringe of noble larches that stand between our lawn and the road. I could just see the dim profile of the enfolding hills, outlined against the star-emblazoned sky — could guess that in the profounder night below lay our own little sleeping loch.

To my immediate left was the drive leading to the stables. Between me and the hill there was an uninterrupted passage at the back of the house, and it became only necessary for me to turn my eyes in that direction to see the great mass of our familiar friend

looming mighty solemn and mysterious against the stars.

The air, though without perceptible motion, was wonderfully balmy. The pendent foliage of the larches hung without a tremble. Not the faintest sound broke upon the profound and impressive silence. All nature lay, not asleep, not dead, but under a pale enchantment, beautiful, unearthly.

Lying back in my deck-chair, I gave myself up to thought. Diana occupied my mind to the exclusion of all else. The anxiety of the Mountain had not so much aroused as confirmed my own apprehensions. All that he had said — or, rather, all that he had not said — I had felt ever since I had witnessed the effect of the fairy-man upon Diana.

My eyes communing with the stars, I sought to disentangle the lines of their intermingled fates. That some mysterious power was interesting itself in these two, I doubted not. Otherwise, why should Diana have dreamed of him even before she saw him? With vividness I recalled her dream — related to me on the day she and I had gone fishing in the loch, and I recalled her very words: "There seemed to be someone influencing me. There seemed to be music and dancing. I was frightened."

This, surely, was more than the long arm of coincidence? Who could doubt that a prophetic vision of the night had been vouchsafed to Diana? Recalled thus in the moonlight, it quickened my imagination. I saw myself fighting against forces that I did not even begin to understand. They were arrayed on the side of the fairy-man. Other forces — and I visualised them as powers of light in contradistinction to powers of darkness — were arrayed on the side of Diana.

These must have been my last waking thoughts — at all events, the last in my consciousness.

I was awakened by a sharp pain. Regaining my scattered senses, I found Billy — our Persian cat — clawing my right knee. My first feeling of annoyance was forgotten in wonder. Billy was curiously moved. His yellow slits of eyes emitted light. His lips, drawn back, gave vent to sounds indicative of unusual excitation. He seemed in the throes of some satanic, yet gleeful, emotion to which I could give no name.

Taking him into my arms, I sought to pacify him, but the caresses that usually gave him pleasure had not upon this occasion the slightest soothing effect. He struggled fiercely, and, after biting me severely on the hand, sped at a mad gallop straight for the hill.

Considerably upset, for Billy was a great favourite of mine, I watched him till he disappeared. Then I became conscious of an atmospheric change. The moonlight had not gone, but mists had descended, and all around me pale light was combating drifting obscurity.

All at once, I started — listened. Something had reached my ears. What? I could not tell. Perhaps a voice — a cry — a distant echo? Coming thus, the thin thread of sound, muted by intervening space, wafted down from the sombre hills, appealed to curiosity, to wonder, and to superstitious fear. It held all the strangeness, all the mystery of the incredible. But as it came again, and yet again, as it stole perceptibly nearer, resolving itself at last into the swelling rise, the dying lapse and fall of melody, I knew it to be singing, and, more, I knew it to be the singing of the fairy-man. No one but he could be far up the hill at that darkling hour; assuredly, no one but he would pour forth his emotions in such a song.

Wondering, I listened. At times the singer's voice would sink to a plaint, inexpressibly touching in its

appeal, and at others it would swell upwards on a sustained and passionate note, calling, summoning, expressing through the melodious medium of song some immediate and imperative need. But, always, whether it voiced longing or loneliness, it was characterised, for me at all events, by something non-human. I could with difficulty believe that it came from the man who was our guest.

Once before had I heard the fairy-man sing that song. It was "The Faun's Lament," the song that had proved so strangely moving to Diana. Even in our drawing-room it had affected me, but here, among the pale phantasmagoria of benighted nature, its power of attraction was increased many times.

And it was beautiful, beautiful exceedingly — irresistibly alluring, irresistibly compelling. Even I, nursing resentment at my heart for Diana's sake, for I knew this singing of his to be one of the potent ministers of his influence, felt vague excitation.

Like Diana's dream, it quickened the imagination, and it must have been so, indeed, for I, standing there in the shadow of the house, with the damp mist breathing upon my face, saw him clearly with the inner eye, up there, singing, with the dark pines for audience, the burn near by murmuring responses, the slopes, under the magic wand of moonlight and music, transformed into a palace of pure enchantment, buttressed by hills and sentinelled by stars.

But first and last I must insist upon the fact that it was the intense simplicity, the tremendous naturalness of that voice that made a universal appeal. It spoke a language all could understand. Almost was it the very voice of creative Nature herself, speaking to all her children with equal directness, with equal insistence. It stirred the slumbering sources of life. It banished sleep. It was calculated to set all the little birds

aflutter, make the owl forget his hunting, make the sheep forget to graze, bring rabbits from their burrows, bring deer from their heights.

Deer? Yes. I find that in seeking a simile I come back to these noble animals; for it was as though a stag, lonely in the night, had raised his voice again and yet again to summon a distant hind. Even the cat, her keener senses snatching at it before it reached my human ears, had been affected by its troubling influence.

And then, all at once, I saw that I was not his only auditor. Someone was leaning out of an open window immediately above my head. In the semi-obscurity I could distinguish no details, but I knew the room to be that of Diana. In a flash the significance of the song struck home. He was calling — to her — and she was listening!

Full of anxiety, I watched and waited. Again and again the song rose and fell, as full of unrestrained emotion as ever, as melodious, as soul-stirring, but to me it had now been stripped of all its beauty. Scales seemed to have fallen from my eyes. It was nothing but a lure!

I was on the point of speaking, in the hope that the sound of my voice would break the evil spell that held Diana there without movement, without sound: when, suddenly, I realised that she had gone. I confess to inexpressible relief. She herself had been strong enough to tear free. But my satisfaction was short-lived, for, as I stooped to pick up the deck-chair preparatory to going indoors, she came gliding round the dark corner of the house.

At the sight, my stupefaction was such that for one incredulous moment I refused to believe the evidence of my eyes. But it was she, and no one else.

All in white and with bare feet, she passed me

quickly and silently, moving with unhesitating steps in the direction of the hill.

"My God!" I cried, and with that I flung down the chair and ran.

I overtook her at the stone steps under the old rowan tree — the steps that lead from the courtyard to the meadow above.

"Diana!" I cried.

She never stopped. I doubt if she even heard. I caught her arm. She tried to wrench herself free. I resisted. Not till that instant did I realise her strength. She was all muscle, resiliency, elasticity — whalebone and steel encased in the softness of satin. I caught her in my arms. We struggled. I could feel her panting breath warm upon my cheek as she turned and twisted — endeavoured to push me from her — strove to break free.

We wrestled in silence, for save my one involuntary cry, no word had been uttered. In a way, we were beyond words.

And then a ray of moonlight struggled clear of the mists and pointed its white finger at us. What Diana saw in my eyes, I cannot tell; but, suddenly, I felt her body relax, grow limp, and with a long shudder she gave in.

Not till I was leading her like a child back to the house did she appear to waken from the state of trance, and realise something of what had taken place. Something, not all, by no means all; for I do not think the listening to the song from her window, the walking downstairs and out into the night, the struggling with me under the rowan tree, reached her consciousness at all. Her discomposure, when she found herself walking beside me in her night-attire, was only equalled by my own.

I like to think she obtained some slight degree of

consolation from the fact that in our struggle her hair had become unplaited, and, being exceptionally long and thick, proved an effective screen.

But this is only my fancy. My real conviction is that she was so tremendously upset, so overwhelmed, that she took cognisance of nothing. I felt sure that it was like a nightmare to her. When I opened the hall-door, she fled upstairs like a hunted doe. From first to last, she never spoke to me at all — never looked at me even, save once, and then she was certainly not herself.

Thinking it over, I am irresistibly reminded of a similar episode, when, long before, in the early dawn that broke over a western isle, her uncle, finding her far up the mountains, had carried her home. Then she had been but a child — now she was a woman. No matter; her age and maturity were immaterial, for in heart, in innocence, in all the endearing and appealing qualities of childhood, Diana was still a child.

If I prayed at all that night, it was a prayer of heart-felt gratitude; and if I had a wish, it was that kindly sleep, with its blessed gift of oblivion, would soon visit Diana.

As for me, full of anxiety I remained long awake. Despairing at length of sleep, I rose and leaned out of my bedroom window. The mists had gone, and the moon had resumed her interrupted sway. All was still — all was silent — all breathed peace, and safety, and repose. And yet I knew that the fairy-man was up there, where the heather grew and the mountain bared its forehead to the stars.

CHAPTER XLV

As soon as the morning dawned, I sought Mary. The time had arrived when it had become absolutely necessary that she should be consulted. Had I acted as I had longed to do, I should have gone straight to her the moment after I had seen Diana safely into her bedroom — but what was the use of giving two people a sleepless night?

Mary listened to all that I told her with interest. Nothing, however, either in her expression or her manner, led me to suppose that she saw any sinister significance in what had occurred.

"Well?" she said, when I had paused, expectant of an outburst.

"Well!" I echoed incredulously. "Is that *all* you have got to say?"

"What d'you expect me to say? Of course it's extraordinary. But you seem to have done just the right thing. In her nighty! Poor girl! She might have caught her death of cold. Pass me that brush, Jack. What sort of day are we going to have? It's lovely and bright now, but I always distrust bright mornings."

Her absolute placidity staggered me. Face to face with it, my indignation seemed misplaced; my anxiety exaggerated. I felt bewildered. Was Mary blind, or was I? Then the memory of all that I had seen, of all that I had imagined, of all that had kept me tossing for many sleep-deserted hours, rushed across me.

Mary listened to my apprehensions, even to my reproaches, with composure, while continuing to brush her hair.

"Of course I see," she commented, when I was compelled to stop for breath; "it seems that Diana has taken to walking in her sleep. But I really don't see what there is to be so excited about. You'll have to lock up earlier, so as to keep her indoors, that's all."

"But . . ." I vociferated, shifting from one foot to the other. "You don't see the danger! Oh, for God's sake, listen to me, and put down that infernal brush!"

She complied with my request, then looked up at me with a puzzled expression.

"What danger, Jack? Unless you mean that she might have caught a cold?"

Intemperately I consigned colds to a place where they are never caught.

Mary put her hands to her ears.

"Don't!" I cried, nearly driven frantic. "For goodness' sake, don't make me repeat it all over again. Can't you understand? He was singing — calling her! She was going to him — like that! Great Heavens, it makes my blood boil! *Now,* d'you see?"

"N-o-o, I don't see — not what you mean."

I am ashamed to say that I glared at her. For sheer inability to visualise wickedness, give me a pure woman. For sheer exasperatingness (if there be such a horrible word), give me one who cannot be exasperated.

"I suppose you approve of his singing?" I asked with sarcasm.

He had a nice voice, she thought, and why shouldn't he sing if he liked? And, if he must sing emotional songs, surely it was better for him to sing them far up the hill, and at night-time, when no one was about! What really puzzled her was why he went up there at all, when he might be warm and comfy in his bed, but there was no accounting for our dear fairy-man — etc.,

etc. She murmured something about meals, too — it was apparently a great consolation to her maternal heart that, however cold he might get on the hill, he at least got his meals hot and under a roof.

"Ah, you do go the length of admitting his songs to be wicked?" I asked grimly.

"Wicked!" Mary started slightly. "Oh, no. I never said that. I said emotional. Everyone has emotions, but I don't think it's nice to stir them up."

"And Diana? I suppose he doesn't stir hers up!"

"Diana? Y-e-s, I'm afraid dear Diana is a little emotional. But," she added quickly, "it's not his fault. He didn't mean to do it. It just happened like that."

I breathed hard. Would nothing convince her? Nothing? From the pure palace of her mind Mary saw everywhere the reflection of her own transparently innocent life, and deemed it the goodness of the world. Distractingly divided between admiration and despair, I believe I should have left her unenlightened had it not been for the danger of Diana.

"Look here," I began, continuing to exercise self-control, "you saw the effect of his singing upon Diana the other evening. Well, then, last night it was the same, only worse. His influence got at her when she was least able to resist. Don't interrupt! Listen! The girl was in her nightdress. Does *that* bring it home to you? Does it? Does it?" And my hand bore heavily upon her shoulder.

"But . . ." Mary was bewildered. "It wasn't his fault. He has no idea. He never knew, the other night. And, according to you, he never knew, last night. How could he? He was ever so far off. You're exaggerating."

"I'm not. I wish to Heaven I were! The danger is real enough. Last night — I was there to stop her —

thank God for that. But it was pure chance. I mightn't be there next time — for, make no mistake, there will be a next time. Supposing — supposing I hadn't been . . . ?"

"Well?"

"Do you realise what would inevitably have happened — the awfulness of it — the horribleness of it! She would have gone straight up to him — like that — and then . . ."

"You needn't go on." Mary had flushed. She drew herself up. "I don't believe it. And, anyway, I don't want to hear. I'm positive you're wrong. If she had gone to him in her sleep, he would have been kind to her, and taken her back to bed, the same as you did."

She confronted me, her head uptilted, her eyes defiant.

"You're — you're unbelievable!" I ejaculated. "You're too good to be true. I give you up. No, I won't. Stop, listen to me. Remember, I've warned you, and you won't take it. We've got a solemn duty to that girl — she's a trust — yes, for you, as well as me. If we shut our eyes and refuse to see — if anything happens to her — we'll never forgive ourselves to our dying day. Diana! So sweet — so helpless! Last night . . . And you won't help. My God!"

I was conscious of a hand laid upon my arms as I strode to and fro. I would have shaken it off, but it clung to me.

Then Mary began to speak. Thinking it over later, I recognised reluctantly that I had been spoken to as though I were a child, but at the time I was only conscious of its effect, which was undeniably soothing, undeniably reassuring. She impressed herself and her opinions on me as though I were wax and she a seal. Some women have that power — not particularly clever women, most certainly not artful women, but women

who possess their souls in unapproachable serenity, women eminently fitted to be stay-anchors in any storm.

I listened to her voice. I heard that one must think no evil — that one must confidently anticipate good. It is a beautiful creed, as preached by Mary. Of course, I had heard it all before, but this time it seemed peculiarly appropriate.

Gradually my excitement and my anxiety subsided. It was, I admitted to myself, improbable, but just possible, that I had been mistaken. One must not be dogmatic. Events had occasionally proved Mary to be in the right. My old predilection for the fairy-man returning in a wave, as the possibility of his innocence was forced upon me, ranged itself upon Mary's side. Praise be to Heaven, I am not one of those people who never give in.

Turning to my wife, I found that she was smiling up at me. Impulsively I took her into my arms and kissed her.

"Mary," I cried, "I'm wrong. You're right. God bless your pure heart!" And would you believe it? — she was as much confused at being lauded for virtue as though she had been convicted of vice.

CHAPTER XLVI

But when I reached my room, doubts again assailed me, and inaction became impossible.

It needed but a few minutes to prove that the fairy-man had not returned. Hurrying out of doors, I sought to intercept him ere he reached the house. Failing to see him, either on our hill or under the trees that shelter the burn, I took to the road and crossed the bridge that leads in the direction of Inverlochlarig. Upon my immediate right, beyond a barbed-wire fence, lay a meadow sloping steeply upwards, sheep-dotted, then a rough wall, then a hill clad with bracken at its base, but naked as it neared the skyline. This hill I knew to be a favourite with the fairy-man. It was possessed of fissures, or ravines, filled with giant boulders, softened by the foliage of dwarf oaks, garlanded with ivy, and decked with innumerable ferns. An additional attraction was a cave — about which haunted many a legend — cunningly concealed by nature from the ken of wayfarers on the road.

Many times had the fairy-man waxed enthusiastic over this particular hill. He averred that fairies loved it. I thought it possible that he had passed, at all events, part of his unaccountable night within the cave. There, at any rate, he would have been protected from the dew which drenched grass and foliage and had already saturated my boots. My hopes were rewarded, for I had but climbed a few hundred yards when I saw him, far off, descending the hill at considerable speed.

And now that our meeting was imminent, I asked

myself with some doubt what I intended to say. Insensibly, and little by little, my mood had changed. I know not what influenced me most — whether it was the recollection of his endearing and childlike qualities, qualities that appeared to deny in him even the possibility of evil — or whether it was the opinions of both Mary and Pam acting subconsciously upon a mind habitually predisposed to optimism — or, lastly, whether it was the radiance of the young day, which, in its clear-eyed innocence, seemed to give the lie to all the dark imaginings of the night — but, whichever influence predominated, the fact remains that I felt suspicion and antagonism just oozing out of me.

Through the gleaming bracken and over the diamond grass he came leaping. There was something about his youth, and grace, and exceeding swiftness that seemed singularly detached from mortality. His passage reminded me instinctively of something elemental — sunlight sweeping over the hills is the only simile that comes to mind. And if I did not smile a greeting, it was only because some lingering trace of resentment strove to repress a mental attitude whose best interpreter was a smile.

If any difficulty of opening conversation existed, it was at once overcome by his shout of "What time is it?"

All recollection of time and its responsibilities had passed from me, but, after consulting my watch, I informed him that it wanted twenty minutes of nine o'clock.

"Ye gods!" he cried. "I must have a bath. I'll be late again for breakfast. D'you think dear Penelope will forgive me?"

This touched a sore place. Mary, I knew, would forgive him anything.

"Hullo!" he cried, and inspected me closely and

with affectionate solicitude. "You've cut yourself shaving. I hate shaving, don't you? Hideously unnatural clipping off our hair in patches, as though we were French poodles. Highland cattle now, how shaggy, how sensible! Man is the only naked animal, isn't he? I detest clothes. I dance much better without them."

He hummed a lilting air, and, with hands upraised and fingers snapping, began to dance over the grass.

I watched him in silence, mentally drifting. I had reasons, good reasons, for both fearing him and being angry with him, yet not one came to stiffen my resistance to the influence he radiated. Even contempt for my own continual vacillation passed from my bemused mind. For the moment nothing remained but a warm and insidious pleasure that flooded my entire body and mounted to my head like the fumes of strong wine. This delight was both personal and impersonal, but I think the latter predominated. I know I rejoiced in his physical existence, and the glad soul of him, as though he were the spirit of immortal youth, the never-ending rebirth of innocence and opportunity that dances over life's sea in waves of successive childhood.

Suddenly, and with a wrench, I jerked myself free. I mocked at myself. What the deuce! He was just a man, my guest, and a devilish awkward one at that, and obviously as mad as a hatter. Could anything be more ridiculous than his dancing like this, on my meadow, before breakfast? What Mary and Pam could see in him, I did not know. I wasn't going to be taken in, not if I knew it. And, my mind concentrating sternly on material facts, I noticed that his well-worn suit of blue serge was saturated with dew and sadly in need of being pressed.

"You'll pay for this one of these days," I blurted.

He paused in his dancing step.

"Rheumatism, lumbago, sciatica," I prophesied grimly. "You'll wake up one wet morning on the hillside as crooked as a twisted tree, and as full of lamentations as Caliban."

"Nonsense," he chuckled. "I feel more like Ariel than Caliban. I've never been ill in my life. I haven't even a thought of illness in me, and you can't feel what you can't think."

I grunted, upon which he looked at me quickly.

"You're cross," he said wonderingly.

A sudden heat of indignation seethed up in me, but, reluctant to speak in anger, I kept silent.

"That's because you slept under a roof," he explained pleasantly.

"No," I said slowly; "as a matter of fact, I didn't sleep much, and"—here I looked full at him—"I think you're responsible."

"Me!"

"Yes, I heard you—singing."

"Was I? Perhaps I was. Why should you mind? And, anyway, I was up there, far off, I don't see . . ."

"It wasn't the loudness of it, but the meaning in it."

His astonishment increased.

"What the devil *did* you mean by it?"

We faced each other on the slope of the field. At last I had the grim satisfaction of calling him to account.

"Mean by it?" he repeated in perplexity; then with his sidelong smile, "Would you ask the wind what it means, or the rain?"

"I would not. I'm not mad yet, though I seem in danger of becoming so if this sort of thing goes on. You are neither the wind nor the rain. I suppose you are answerable for your actions?"

"Strange your asking that."

"Why?"

"I've often wondered."

"Hump! You can't wonder more than I do."

For a moment he looked wistful, almost sad, certainly troubled by unusual thought. His eyes narrowed, and became full of depth and incomprehensible meaning. A sigh escaped him.

"I just don't seem to belong. Like always goes to like, that's why I'm an outcast."

I seemed to be feeling what he inaudibly thought more than to be listening to what he actually said. He had an uncanny way both of catching at and communicating a mood, comparable only with animal instinct. The moment was memorable for the reason that it was the first and only time I ever heard him express a regret that he was different from others. Strangely illuminating, that flash of self-revelation seemed to show me the intense loneliness of his life, for, after all, however much we may love inanimate Nature, she can be no substitute for flesh and blood. It was perhaps the fact that that wild, free nature-spirit of his was housed in human flesh and blood that constituted both the tragedy and the comedy of his existence. What if it had, indeed, been an error? Or, still more grim, what if it had been a practical joke on the part of that Nature he so trusted and so loved? The very idea set loose a flood of conjecture.

I am thankful to say I stopped myself at once. With an effort I recalled all the material and reassuring circumstances of my own life, and, as the returning tide floated me into the blessed country of familiar associations, the memory of Diana rushed back and upbraided me for a duty postponed.

"Look here! I insist on an explanation. That song —it was a rotten sort of song, not decent, wicked. Oh, you needn't stare at me like that. You must know what I mean."

"I don't."

"Well, I'll tell you. You sang it with intention. You can't deny it."

"Why should I deny it? Every song, every sound even, has its intention. If you could learn the language of even audible sounds, you would know that."

"Tush! This is pure sophistry, mere prevarication! You can't hoodwink me. That song; it was insidious, evil — it was nothing but a lure."

"Ah" — an interested and yet faintly mocking smile raised the corners of his mouth. "You felt it like that — a lure?"

"I did, and so did — everyone who heard it," I concluded lamely.

"I see now. Of course you couldn't sleep. You felt drawn. You wanted to come out to the wind and the stars — but not alone? You surely would have brought her with you?"

"Her?" I stammered. How dare he allude to her at all?

"Yes, Penelope. You couldn't have left her behind. There is a sleeping dryad in Penelope, but your kisses have not awakened her. Perhaps it is because you have killed her interest in her past. You remember, you told us you had made her so comfortable. No doubt you sinned through ignorance. Indifference clogs the spirit as well as the body. Penelope's spirit takes its clue from Penelope's body; it spends far too much time in bed, no doubt under at least four blankets. Sweet Penelope! I can see her up there, white-limbed in the moonlight, free at last, dancing lighter than a leaf."

I stood speechless, divided between indignation and wild hilarity. This was turning the tables with a vengeance!

"And," he continued, speaking with grave kindness

and as though imparting moral instruction to a small and backward child, "you have yet a great deal both to learn and unlearn. Love and Nature are not evil — not a wicked lure, as you put it. They are our great teachers. Perhaps — I don't know — but perhaps they spoke with my voice last night. You don't often get the chance of hearing them, for you muzzle them with what you call civilisation — and they will out, they won't be muzzled, they won't be denied the life that you deny to everything you can't see, and everything you can't hear. Oh, man! man! . . ." He shook me tempestuously by the lapel of the jacket. "You're blind, asleep, oppressed by mortality. Your own poets tell you that, but you shut your ears, or else smile in a superior way and call truth poetical licence. Wasn't it Wordsworth who complained that the world couldn't see anything in Nature, and vowed he'd rather be a Pagan on the off-chance of catching sight of old Proteus?"

I listened, semi-dazed. Vaguely, inarticulately, I marvelled at this mythological sally. I gasped at its unscrupulous, diabolical cleverness. It hit me in my weak spot. It flung over me a veil of insidious delight, while it thrust at the hole in my armour. It was as though the fairy-man had said to his accomplices the sheep (a flock had assembled out of mere curiosity, and were listening intently): "See this old fellow? He's hopelessly addicted to a vice called mythology. Listen to me pandering to him." He had thought it all out. He must have done so. How otherwise did he know that I cherished a sympathetic feeling for that delightful old sea-deity Proteus, taking his ease on the warm Carpathian shore, eluding tiresome people by the beautifully simple process of metamorphosing himself into a bird, or a rabbit?

And another thing; it amazed me to hear him quoting Wordsworth. Keats I could have understood — but a

poet of such impeccable morality as Wordsworth! No! It savoured too much of the Devil quoting Scripture.

His voice had a haunting and magic charm. Had it been visible, it would have been a golden voice, as colourful as his eyes, as unusual, as uncanny. Merlin must have had just such another voice, the audible instrument of attraction, of a peculiar and hypnotic quality — the sort of siren voice possessed by Venus when she murmured to young Adonis: "Bid me discourse, I will enchant thine ear."

"I talk like this to dear little Pam," he continued, and, as always when he spoke of the child, his tone grew tender. "She understands me, for the fairy-world is hers also. But I can't get at you nearly so easily, for, though seeds of belief are there, you will persist in watering them with doubt. Life is so simple really, but you make it so complex. You worry yourself, and others, too. Yes, you do. I came down that hill a moment ago just soaked through and through by this great sunlit peace, and now I feel like a dog whose advances have been rebuffed."

I could not repress a smile. His face lit up instantaneously. A crow of jovial laughter escaped him.

"That's better," he cried. "Keep on smiling. That's your real self. Don't think. Thinking ages one terribly. You looked quite old just now. Be young. Laugh, and Nature laughs with you. Look at the loch laughing. Look at the sun on the hill. Can't you feel the gladness of it all? That's life. By Jove! It's good to be alive; it's good to love. I say, where's our beautiful Diana?"

I stared at him, literally deprived of words. The assurance of the question, its breeziness, its utter unconsciousness of any reason for not mentioning Diana, were staggering. In view of his apparent ignorance, it was up to me to conceal my knowledge. In order to do

so, I had determined to leave Diana's name rigorously out of the conversation. That he himself would refer to her, and in such an inconsequent and airy manner, never entered my head. Did it imply a callous insensibility, or an amazing innocence? Either was astounding.

Transparently unaware of my bewilderment, he rattled on:

"You haven't seen her yet? Of course not. I always forget the exquisite hours you all waste in a house. I've been up and about since peep of day. But Diana . . .! It seems ridiculous her sleeping in a bed. I always think of her as Aurora, daughter of Hyperion and Thea, opening with her rosy fingers the gates of the east, and bringing dew in her little palms to sleeping flowers. Diana is a splendid name, glorious physique and all that, but too cold for her, too vestal, too chaste."

I caught at my breath.

"She's just freshness, and dawn, and the joy of awakening life, isn't she? Only, she doesn't know it yet. Ah, well, she'll find out."

"She will," I said curtly, "when she's married."

"Married!" he cried, and shouted with laughter. "Ye gods! She'll never marry. She's like me; a part of the woods, and streams, and the wind upon the hill."

I measured him with my eyes. "She's engaged to be married," I said coldly. He stared, and I, noting his astonishment and incredulity, wondered why I had not told him before.

"You — you're joking!" he said.

"I'm not. His name is Gerald — Gerald Lindley. A fine young chap. He's what you called her counterpart last night. Not only that, but she's going to be married soon — as soon as he gets a rise in salary, and can fix up a house at Surbiton."

But he wasn't even listening.

"Strange!" I heard him murmur to himself. "She never told me. She forgot — of course, she forgot. Diana married! Impossible!"

Suddenly becoming aware of my presence, he turned to me. "And, anyway," he said with a smile, "it'll make no difference."

"No difference!" I exclaimed and glared. "It's bound to make the greatest difference. What the devil d'you mean?"

But he would not tell me. His rollicking laugh rang out. It seemed to be one of those quite preposterous jokes which he always kept up his sleeve.

CHAPTER XLVII

SHORTLY after breakfast the landau that I had ordered to take Gâmine and the Mountain to the station drew up at the door. I welcomed it as I would have welcomed a hearse.

"You needn't go yet," I said. "He's come at least twenty minutes too soon. You see, the attractions of our cook . . ."

"It's love that makes the world go round," trilled Gamine.

She was looking very smart, and particularly pretty that morning; particularly happy, too.

"I believe you're glad to go," I said, not without reproach.

"I'm not," she answered gently. "The time has passed like a dream. I'm afraid I'll wake up. I've never been happier anywhere in my life. Oh, Jack, if you could only see my heart!"

"It's bad enough to see your face. I can't believe you care."

"I do. I care fearfully. I generally care much more than other people. If you only knew what I'm going through, you wouldn't be so — so unsympathetic."

"Going through!" As if I needed to be told! And at that I thanked her again and again for all she had done, was doing, and was going to do, both of intent and by accident.

"Without you anything might have happened," I prognosticated with a shake of the head.

She frankly admitted the probability.

"And," I continued earnestly, "if you get oppressed

and overshadowed, you can always dump him down as you pass through Edinburgh as a rival to Arthur's Seat. No. I didn't mean that really, Gamine. It's playing it pretty low down to make fun of a guest — a man one respects. I'm sorry he's going away. We've had one or two little talks together, and you can take it from me that he's a splendid chap — not at all what you think."

Observing her eyebrows to arch enquiringly, I continued:

"Of course, I know he won't appeal to you, unless someone opens your eyes."

"Meaning you, Jack, dear?"

"Yes, meaning me. A woman just gropes about in the dark. Her judgment — when she happens to have any — is obscured by the mists of sex. There's nothing more misleading. But a man always sizes up another man right away. Now, I've discovered quite a lot of good in our Mountain — considerably under the surface, of course — and I'd like to overcome your feminine prejudices. Try and see him with my eyes. You'll find it difficult, of course; but you'll succeed; you've got imagination."

She thanked me for my good opinion of her. Her voice trembled slightly; but, in spite of her emotion, I was glad to see from her eyes that she had not lost her delightful sense of humour.

"And, Gamine," I went on — "about this journey, take my advice, exercise tact, humour him, see that he's well supplied with appropriate literature — 'Golf Illustrated,' and Gibbon's 'Decline and Fall,' and trifles of that sort. Get him going, and he'll forget all about you. Trust me. I know him."

"I can see you do, Jack."

I nodded, well pleased. It was extraordinary what a mellowing, softening, and, more especially, improv-

ing, influence I sometimes have over Gamine. Not only did it add to her sweetness, but to her sense. She agreed with me. Her manner, too, was perfect. Everyone likes to be listened to with deference. Her sparkle was not dead — thank Heaven for that! — but it was controlled, unobtrusive, employed — if I may put it fancifully — to illumine the solid wisdom of others, rather than to flicker upon the ephemeral creations of her own wit.

All in a glow of affectionate appreciation, I expressed the conviction that we should miss her tremendously. At that, she looked at me with a singular expression. The piquant little face beneath the smart toque and behind the black veil softened. Her eyes moved me, so luminously did they portray a deeper emotion than even I anticipated from the moment of farewell. It was as though the barrier that had been removed so miraculously for my benefit while boating on the loch had all at once become, not transparent, but partially diaphanous, certainly diaphanous enough to permit me to guess at what lay behind.

"Yes?" I encouraged gently.

"You don't know, Jack, what this visit has meant to me," she said in a low voice.

I nodded with great sympathy, touched, gratified, yet slightly astonished.

"I do know," I assured her, smiling.

"I wonder," she murmured.

"Of course I know. But we won't refer to it. Besides, you exaggerate the part I played."

"No" — she shook her head emphatically — "I don't. You asked me here."

"I see. You mean if I hadn't . . ."

"Exactly."

"It would never have happened?"

"That's it, Jack. It might never have happened. It's

wonderful. It's fate. It just makes all the difference."

I looked at her. Happiness exuded from her entire person. Her smile was positively radiant. I smiled too.

"I believe," I said, emphasising the statement with an upraised forefinger, "that you're catching sight of the blue bird after all."

For answer she tucked her arm impulsively within mine, and gave me an affectionate squeeze.

"All the same," I continued guardedly, "it's a little too flattering to an old chap like me. What? You don't take me? Well, I mean that I fail to see why my having become your confidant can add so much to your happiness. But . . . Hullo! What's the joke now?"

She was shaking with laughter.

"Jack!" she gurgled, "I could kiss you."

"Do," I encouraged.

But, instead of complying, she dragged me forcibly into the garden.

"Now," she said breathlessly, when a considerable space of lawn had separated us from the house, "tell me all about them. You've no idea how tremendously I'm interested. We must circumvent that wicked fairy-man. I want Diana to be happy — as happy as I am."

I mumbled something under my breath.

She looked at me quizzically.

"You never could tell a fib at all convincingly, Jack. I often wonder how you get through life. I saw you with him before breakfast. You went out to speak to him on purpose."

"Yes, Gamine."

"And you didn't get the best of it?"

"No, Gamine."

"Now, tell me the rest."

"I expect you know the rest as well as I do; and can make more of it — you couldn't easily make less."

"Ah, as hopeless as that?"

"Worse."

She prodded the turf with the point of her parasol. She looked grave. "I'm sorry," she said. "I had hoped things would right themselves. Fascination is a great force, but love is a greater."

"Hullo! Hullo! You said something different last time."

"Did I? Well, perhaps I did. You surely don't expect a woman to be consistent. And, anyway, I don't think so to-day. I'm all on the side of Cupid. He's a revengeful little god, isn't he, Jack?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"And," she went on, puckering her brows, "I hate to go away leaving these lovers' fate in the balance. If I stayed — but I don't want to stay, Jack — I'm sure I could manage it. It would be lovely to be a fairy-godmother to them. As for you, you're hopeless."

"Hopeless, Gamine?"

"Absolutely. You're a perfect baby in affairs of the heart."

"Me! A perfect . . . Ha! Ha! That's good. Baby? I don't know what's come over you."

"That's just it," she flashed. "You don't know what's come over me."

For a moment, I confess, I looked at her with a very comprehensible bewilderment. She had flung this ridiculous assertion at me with an air of bright triumph, an air of beaming finality; as if, forsooth, my inability to discover some symptom — probably entirely imaginary — connected with herself were proof conclusive of my unfittedness to specialise in affairs of the heart. Then I smiled leniently upon her. Even the cleverest among women are children in their dealings with men. Of weaker intellect and of softer mould, and yet not without a certain charm, — the endearing, appealing charm

of helpless childhood, — they must be treated gently, compassionately, with that protective tenderness of the strong towards the weak which the world admires under the name of chivalry. Now, here was Gamine. Far be it from me to deny that she was gifted with intuition, and even with flashes of occasional and erratic brilliance. But — mark this — not a case had we discussed but she had used it as a spring-board for diving promptly into the personal. Good Heavens! How often had not I been obliged to disentangle her from a maze of purely irrelevant reminiscences of an extremely sentimental nature! Of course, I had always humoured her, deferred to her, and, while guiding her with sound masculine common-sense, had even allowed her to imagine that she was the principal and I the assistant. And this was the result. Ah, well, I had brought it on myself, and all I could now do was to continue as I had begun.

But she left me little time for retrospection.

"Oh, Jack!" she cried reproachfully, "I never thought you clever, but I did think that you had mastered the rudiments. After all my lessons! After all our collaboration! And, moreover, you're weak. You change your silly old mind every day."

"Satan reproving sin," I growled; but she swept on:

"I hate leaving you. As soon as I'm gone, something disastrous is bound to happen."

I would fain have protested, but I couldn't. Truth is extremely unpalatable sometimes. And, although Gamine exaggerated, as is her wont, yet a still, small voice — that would neither be still nor small — joined in her accusation. But it was her concluding sentence that was responsible for the sudden sinking of my heart. As usual my feelings were an open book to my companion.

"Cheer up!" she cried, with a cheerfulness that

jarred. "You can't help it. We all love you in spite of it. As if no one had faults—good gracious! Listen. I can't stand you looking like that. I'll tell you a secret that'll buck you up no end."

I turned a lack-lustre eye upon her. She beamed. She came closer.

"He's leaving to-morrow," she whispered.

"Leaving? Impossible! I haven't heard a word of it."

"He told Mary a quarter of an hour ago. It's true."

"But why? Why? What reason did he give?"

"Reason?" She shrugged her shoulders. "Would he give a reason?"

"No," I concurred, "he wouldn't." And then I sank into a brown study. One thing alone engrossed my mind. The fairy-man was going away; Diana would be free.

As we strolled back to the house, we met the Mountain. Something grave and final in his manner told me that he had come to say "good-bye." Of course he was extremely conventional—thanked me for my hospitality in a manner that made us both supremely uncomfortable—besides, as I told him, thanks were really more due to him than to me.

"Not at all," he said. "Not at all."

"We'll miss you at bridge," said I, trying to be both truthful and pleasant.

He hesitated. His eyes turned first to Diana, who, seated on the grass, was teaching Pam to knit, then reverted to me.

"It's going to be all right," I assured him, with a confidence born of the information imparted by Gamine.

He raised his shaggy brows. His "Ah!" deep-drawn, testified to profound but inarticulate satisfaction.

The moment of departure arrived. "I wonder," thought I, "will he shake hands with me at last."

He shook hands with Mary, with Diana, with Pam, nodded curtly to the fairy-man, then turned to me. "To be or not to be?" thought I. My right hand modestly concealed itself in its own trouser pocket. His, I noticed, affected nonchalance by his side. Neither, I felt positive, would budge before it was absolutely certain of appreciation. It was a deadlock.

And then, our eyes meeting, and something flashing between them, lo and behold! his hand was in mine, and mine in his, before we knew where we were; and which of us was the more astonished, or the more pleased, it would be hard to say.

We watched them drive away through the open gate and down the road. They were sitting side by side on the back seat. The Mountain was at grips with Gamine's hat-box. Resenting its position on the precarious summit of Gamine's lunch-basket, and Gamine's two portmanteaux, and Gamine's vast hold-all, it was apparently making frantic efforts to sit upon the Mountain's knee. Time and again he coaxed it to its former position; time and again it hurled itself into his arms. I found myself pitying the Mountain, almost as much as I envied him. Gamine, dainty, cool, and apparently quite unconscious of her companion's struggles, was looking back at us, smiling and waving. And so they passed from sight.

"Well, they're gone," said I sadly, as we turned towards the house.

"That makes two less for dinner," said Mary.

CHAPTER XLVIII

THE sense of depression that followed hard upon the departure of Gamine was destined to be accentuated. It looked as though shadows were closing around the little party that was left behind.

Mary it was who bore the evil tidings. The moment I saw her hurrying towards me along the garden-path, I knew by her face that something was wrong.

"It's Diana," she burst forth, as soon as she got within earshot. "Jack! She wants to leave us!"

Each looked into the other's face and read therein consternation.

"It's impossible!" I cried. "You must have misunderstood her."

But Mary shook her head. I was still incredulous. I knew, of course, that she was bound to leave us one day — when the thrice fortunate Gerald claimed her; but that day was still distant, and until it dawned I had looked forward with confidence to her remaining an inmate of our household. The departure of other governesses I had borne with equanimity — but that of Diana! It was a personal blow.

"But why?" I stammered. "Why? What's that she said? Not the right person? Bountiful Bacchus! She's the only person. Didn't you tell her that?"

Of course Mary had told her. There seemed no reason, no excuse even; for Diana had insisted that we had been too good to her. She had been seriously upset, for when Mary, losing sight of her own feelings in the girl's distress, had kissed her, Diana had cried: "Don't, please, please don't, or I'll cry."

And then, just as Mary was telling me all this, she suddenly broke off and looked at me.

"What is it, Jack?" she asked.

"It's odd. It just struck me — they're both leaving. We hear of it on the same day. Yes, I mean the fairy-man too. Gamine told me. Very sudden, isn't it? He seemed a fixture yesterday."

"Yes. I hoped so, too. I don't believe he knew of it yesterday. How we'll miss him! Pam will be broken-hearted. Well, what is it?"

"I was just wondering. It — it seems almost too remarkable to be a coincidence. Frankly, I — I don't like it, Mary."

Mary's clear and candid eyes gazed at me in astonishment.

"Don't think I mean a collusion," I burst forth vehemently. "Great Heavens, no! She's incapable of it. I'd stake my life that she has no idea of his move. But he? I shouldn't wonder if there are depths in him that we haven't sounded — beyond our soundings, perhaps. A mind as elemental as his works in a way so simple that its very simplicity conceals it like a subtlety. Now, why did he tell you to-day that he was leaving unless — unless he calculated that you would tell me?"

"Whatever d'you mean, Jack? Of course he knew I'd tell you. What's all this mystery about?"

"My dear," said I, "if I knew I'd be a happier man. Forewarned is forearmed. There, don't look so puzzled; just put it down to your old husband's eccentricities. Perhaps I'm all wrong. It may be only instinct on his part, like the restlessness of the swallows before they migrate. Now, let's go on talking about Diana."

Walking to and fro, we continued to discuss the situation. After some talk I obtained Mary's rather reluctant consent to a suggestion that I should be allowed to speak to Diana on the subject.

"You see," I said persuasively, "where the lion fails, the mouse steps in. I have a great fellow-feeling for Diana. I believe I'll succeed, because"—here I laid an impressive hand on Mary's shoulder, so that, brought to a standstill, she was forced into an attitude of extreme attention—"because I understand her *mythologically.*"

Upon any other occasion this would have given rise to a difference of opinion, but Mary was now too perturbed to think of anything but the threatened departure, and it was entirely owing to her advice that I hurried towards the arbour, a favourite haunt of Diana's in her leisure hour.

Masses of cloud were drifting over the face of the sky. Far off, on distant hills, rain was falling. I could see the veils of water faintly obscuring the horizon. The wonderful weather was breaking at last. Birches and bracken were bethinking themselves of turning traitor, and had begun already to discard the silver and emerald of summer for the gold and russet of autumn. The landscape was still beautiful, but it was no longer the beauty of lusty growth and rising sap, but the loveliness that gilds and precedes decay. From the pale flames of foliage that lighted the woodlands to the warm scarlet of toadstools that emblazoned the mosses, all preached the same lesson. Everything passes.

It was but natural, I suppose, that I should read into the face of Nature some of the sadness that weighed so heavily upon my own spirits. Vainly I tried to picture this beloved scene without Diana. The prospect filled me with gloom. So closely had she allied herself, not only with the scenic loveliness, but with all that lent it life and inner meaning, all that constituted its haunting and endearing charm, that it, without her, was unthinkable.

Time and again I looked towards the house and — that promising nothing — consulted my watch, for the minutes lagged interminably. I was on the point of giving her up, when suddenly I saw her appear at a side door, pause as if uncertain, then move slowly in my direction.

I know not if my request surprised her — for I avoided looking into her face — but I had the satisfaction of knowing that I was followed as I entered the shelter. Seated opposite each other on the broad bench that runs round three sides of the building, we could see the path descending steeply to the road, the dark trees trooping down to the loch, the still water with its glint of naked steel, and the sombre mountains beyond. The only sound was the faint patter of rain upon the roof; the only motion the breath of a fitful breeze.

Diana sat without motion, curiously inert, most unusually apathetic. She might have been a lay-figure, so far removed did she seem from the radiant being who, upon the occasion of our first meeting, had swung through the sunlight leaving behind her a wake of joy. What could have happened to make her like this?

I had been prepared for anything but this frozen immobility. Face to face with it, any plan of action I may have mistily sketched faded to nothingness. It seemed impossible to open a conversation with a person whose mind appeared to be miles away. Then, all at once, like the twinge of a sudden pain, came the realisation of her departure.

"Diana," I blurted, "why are you leaving us?"

She cast one swift, upward glance at me, then her lashes fell. Her expression was tense, constrained, but I believe her to have been moved by my unhappiness, for her fingers twisted together.

I was forced to repeat my question. Her answer,

reluctantly accorded, told me that there was nothing else left for her to do. As she spoke, I seemed to be listening to some audible depth of sorrow. Questioned further, she made me feel as though I were torturing some poor, defenceless animal, for, turning heavy, reproachful eyes on me, she cried:

"How can you ask? You know."

My perplexity proved a blessing in disguise, for it pushed her beyond the sheltering pale of silence. Gazing dumbfounded at this pitifully metamorphosed Diana, I learned that she had not been as ignorant of the previous night's misadventure as I had prayed. Very plainly I saw how the case stood. That which she remembered was so disconcerting that her imagination painted that which she forgot in still more lurid colours. That she had been the unconscious agent of some mysterious power did not weigh with her at all. She had done something shameful. She was apparently capable of doing it again. That being so, she was no longer worthy of trust — no longer fit to take charge of Pam.

As she told me all this, she temporarily lost her apathy. Her colour heightened. And in everything she said intensity of feeling was poignantly noticeable, for she addressed herself less to me than to that exalted and inflexible sense of right and wrong that had become her accuser.

As I listened, my respect for her — always great — increased. She was supremely indifferent to what I, or anyone else, thought of her. The one important thing to her mind was what she thought herself; and the fact that she had gone down in her own estimation was continually before her — a something that she could neither forget nor forgive.

Sitting there, a pained spectator of her distress, a pained auditor of her semi-conscious confession, I

was at first too overwhelmed to remonstrate. Many contradictory emotions swept over me. One I remember well — the swift realisation of Diana's amazing youthfulness. Youth alone could take itself so seriously, could exaggerate so little into so much, could be so intolerant in its judgments, so warm and sweeping in its accusations. My whole heart went out to her, if for this alone, went out to her impulsively, with a great tenderness, a great compassion.

And in this I like to think that her beauty played no part. No doubt it flamed against the dark background, but I did not see it, for while she spoke I kept my eyes aloof lest I might add to her distress.

When her voice died away, the steady patter of raindrops on the roof reclaimed attention. The cheerless sound — as though the very clouds were weeping for a bright spirit downcast — the sun's eclipse, the chill and damp exhalations that rose from the saturated soil, all allied themselves mournfully with the sorrow of Diana.

And at that my feelings could no longer be restrained. I plunged into speech. Warmly I disassociated her from the actions of the girl who had fallen under the spell of the fairy-man, firmly convinced that that other self was not present, and had nothing to do with the distressful soul that gazed almost unseeingly at me from out the eyes of Diana. It was not her fault, I argued; she could not help it; it was but a mood, a phase, it would pass; it detracted nothing from the whole-hearted devotion to Pam that characterised the real Diana sitting there before me, the girl to whom we were grateful, whom we loved, and whom we wanted to stay.

This, and much more, I advanced, striving with all my might to persuade her to see things as I saw them. But my words were wasted, for as I leaned im-

pulsively forward and looked into the set face—strangely wan in the grey light—I saw that she scarcely heard me, was in fact too deeply involved with her own outraged self-respect to be influenced by any words of mine.

"Will nothing convince you?" I cried at last in despair.

She shook her head. Slight though the motion was, it yet conveyed the unalterable nature of her decision.

"Diana," I pleaded, "for Heaven's sake, don't take it so much to heart! He never knew it. I've forgotten it. Besides, you'll be free sooner than you think."

Faint wonder dawned within her eyes.

"He's going away to-morrow," I announced.

Her lips moved inaudibly, repeating the word "to-morrow." But though, as I knew beforehand, the information would be news to her, she seemed curiously and apathetically blind to its significance.

I continued to speak eagerly, persuasively, hopefully. But as I proceeded, my heart sank, for nothing I could say appeared to have the power to lighten her profound discouragement. I looked at her in perplexity. She was being unreasonable. The fairy-man was obviously the cause of all her distress. He was leaving us almost at once. When he had gone, things would be as they had been before. Why, then, this continued misery? . . . And then a sudden thought occurred to me.

"Diana," I questioned, "is there anything else—any other reason?"

Very reluctantly she nodded. That she could not trust herself to speak was plain. Indeed, her eyes avoided mine, as though they shrank from permitting me to witness their distress.

"Bad news?" I continued. "Your mother?"

"No, no."

"Gerald?"

Again that little nod, so eloquent of pent-up tears.

Gerald! My imagination worked. What could have happened to Gerald? It is significant now to remember that not for a moment did I suspect him of fickleness. Two vital facts made such a suspicion impossible — a quality in Diana that made fickleness in a lover unthinkable — and a quality in Gerald that laughed the supposition to scorn.

But when, anxiously questioning, I probed for the truth, I was met at every turn by a negative motion of her head. Gerald was not ill, neither had he met with an accident. I broke off — baffled. I was at my wits' end. What had happened to Gerald? What the deuce could have happened to Gerald? And there I was, seated opposite her, racked with anxiety, fretting with impatience, charged to the very lips with sympathy, and yet utterably unable to obtain any reliable information. It was nothing short of maddening. I felt myself getting hot.

And then — Diana herself came to my rescue.

Speaking with difficulty, her eyes still averted, she told me that she had broken off her engagement. I was astounded. I stared at her for a full minute in blank amazement. Very rigid she sat, the dark, rough woodwork of the summer-house making a subdued background for her white face and crown of pale-gold hair. Her eyes stared outwards through the light of the cheerless day, stared at the landscape upon which the rain was softly falling, but I am convinced that she saw neither loch nor hills.

Little by little I came into possession of the story. It affected me deeply, personally. So whole-heartedly had I taken these two young lovers under my own particular wing that I was disappointed beyond words. More, I was indignant — I remember thumping the

rustic table with my fist. Foolish — unnecessary — criminal — were some of the adjectives I used, for I interrupted continuously.

What could one do with a girl who considered herself unworthy? Nothing. For Diana was obstinate enough when it came to defending a principle. It was absolutely no use telling her that what she considered a principle was just a piece of ridiculous quixotry. Good Heavens! the very loyalty that had forced her to break away lest, forsooth, she might spoil Gerald's life, by presenting him with a wife less perfect than he deserved, was surely proof sufficient of her worthiness! She denied this. Her manner was restrained. She was keeping a tight hold on herself. And yet her heart was breaking. Oh, it was sufficiently obvious, even to me, a man. Strive as she might to choke down her emotion, her misery proclaimed itself in spite of her. I felt abashed, as though I were spying upon something not intended for my eyes, something sacred and immensely private, her woman's heart stripped of its veils. Yes, I could see for the first time how deeply she loved him. Was she not proving it by giving him up, knowing full well that by so doing she was voluntarily depriving herself of everything that made life worth living, all hopes, all dreams, all tender anticipations? The pity of it! The misdirected self-sacrifice of it! Ruining her young life for his sake, and unable to see that the blow that killed her happiness would inevitably kill his also. And I could do nothing — nothing!

Of course I wanted to know more. She supplied the information with reluctance. What was the good? All was over. These I could see were her thoughts, but I insisted. The letter conveying the news must have already reached him. There had been no time for an answer, but she was convinced that there would be no

answer. She had given no details. What was the use? She just wanted to go away somewhere and be forgotten. What did it matter what became of her? What did anything matter now? Why couldn't I leave her alone? Couldn't I see — couldn't I see . . .?

And the inevitable occurred — the hot tears that would no longer be restrained.

My very heart was wrung. I could not speak. From the very bottom of my soul I longed for Gerald.

CHAPTER XLIX

My brain struggled back to consciouness. Someone was knocking. The sound troubled me. Thus much I was able to record as I hovered between sleeping and waking, but where I was, what had befallen me, and whether it was morning or evening, I could not tell, until I heard the familiar voice of Jeanie at my bedroom door informing me that I was "wanted downstairs."

At that, memory rushed back, and with it a sense of impending disaster, infinitely disquieting, that swiftly resolved itself into facts connected with Diana. I remembered, too, the long walk to King's House and back, responsible for my having succumbed to the unusual luxury of an afternoon nap.

The sound of the closing door dispelled the last traces of drowsiness.

"Jeanie," I called.

Again the door partially opened, and Jeanie's cap and thin, anxious face reappeared.

"Who wants me?" I demanded.

"I dinna ken his name."

"Tut, you should have asked it. What's he like?"

"Oh, he's just — just a lad. I didna pay the body much attention, forbye he came on a bike, and I've never seen a man warmer. Brush yer hair for ony sake, Master Jack. I'd think shame for ye to be seen wi' a tozzle like that. Let him wait — he's gettin' his breath."

"Where's everyone?" I enquired, as I complied with her instructions.

"Oot, I'm thinkin'. Ye've missed yer tea. Will I get ye a cup? No? Weel, ye'll dae fine now. Aye, downstairs — he's in the study."

I found the stranger by the window, gazing outwards. At the sound of the opening door, he turned and faced me. Not easily shall I forget the favourable impression I received. Manly, forceful, dependable, come to me now as appropriate adjectives; for the resolution resided in his chin, and trustworthiness gazed from his steady eyes. In age I judged him to be about twenty-six, possibly less.

Never, to my knowledge, had I seen him before, and yet there was about him something vaguely familiar.

"My name is Lindley," he announced, stepping forward.

Still I hesitated.

"Gerald Lindley."

Gerald? Of course. He was Gerald! The portrait in the locket flashing to memory, I recognised the original at once. My thoughts leapt to Diana; then, speeding back to the man before me, linked them together with infinite pleasure and satisfaction. Impulsively, I stretched out a hand, less as a tribute to the conventional than as a joyous acceptance of him as Diana's future husband.

"I'm delighted to see you," I said, "delighted!"

His grasp was of a piece with his appearance. My fingers bore painful witness to its strength.

He had called, he said, to see Diana — perhaps — perhaps I knew . . .? And he smiled.

Knew? Of course, I knew. And I congratulated him with all my heart.

"I want to see her, *now,* if you don't mind."

As he said that, I looked at him keenly. If it were possible to apply the adjective to one so incontestably self-reliant, I should have pronounced him anxious.

His grey eyes betrayed him. They gave me the feeling that he was only half with me — the unimportant half — and that the other half was already with Diana. And then, quite suddenly, I recalled the broken engagement.

We stood for a moment without speaking. I could see that he was waiting for me to go in search of Diana. Drawing a handkerchief from his pocket, he mopped his face.

When I offered him a drink, his refusal of it held a touch of impatience. As I prepared to leave the room, many questions burned within me, but a certain quality of reserve in the young fellow tied my tongue. Anything that I might ask would, I realised, savour of unwarrantable curiosity. To him I was practically a stranger — and, what was more, an old fellow. Not all my sympathy could bridge the gulf of years. His affairs were his own, his anxiety was his own, and he made me feel, too, that Diana was his own, yes, even in spite of her refusal to carry out her contract. I turned and left him without a word. I dashed upstairs. Meeting Mary, I told her breathlessly that Gerald had arrived.

"Who?" she asked.

"Gerald. You know. Diana's young man. Where is she?"

But it apppeared that Mary herself had been looking for Diana.

"You're sure Pam's with her?" I asked quickly.

"Quite. They went out together. The child ought to be in bed, and Diana is certainly not in the house. What is it, Jack? You don't think anything can have happened?"

"No, no. It's all right. I'm glad she's with Diana. But — it's queer all the same."

The dusk was slowly invading the house.

"I suppose I'll have to tell him something," I said in a low voice. "He's been scorching to get here. He's all worked up. I could see it in his face. He'll take it badly. I wish to goodness Diana wouldn't stay out so late as this."

I turned to go downstairs.

"Ask him if he'd like some tea," Mary called after me.

In the study the gloom had slightly deepened, but the light was sufficient for me to see the eager anticipation vanish from my visitor's face when he saw me enter alone.

"I'm afraid she's out," I said. "But she's bound to be in soon. My little daughter is with her. Won't you sit down?"

It is curiously illustrative of my perturbation that I did not think of lighting the lamp. The fire had burned low. I could just see his face illuminated by its dim red glow; but, when he suddenly shoved back his chair, he disappeared altogether into shadow.

My thoughts, however, continued to busy themselves with him. The more I saw of him, the more my liking for him increased. There was, I thought, something extraordinarily attractive in his smile. Under other and happier circumstances I could easily picture him full of fun, very boyish and high-spirited in his gaiety. That smile — it haunted recollection. That he could smile at all with Diana's last letter in his pocket was sufficient to make me like him. "It's going to be all right. He'll refuse to give her up," I thought, and could have hugged myself with satisfaction. Then, too, his efforts to respond, and even to make conversation, impressed me. Knowing what we did, this bad quarter of an hour was an ordeal for both of us, but worse for him than for me. In his secret soul he must have wished me at the devil. Did I not come between

his anxious heart and its thoughts of Diana? Uncomfortably aware of this, I admired the self-control and the consideration for others responsible for the verbal assistance he accorded me.

"The days are drawing in," said I, observing him to lean forward and consult his wrist-watch. He assented. And then we both fell a-listening.

"Is this their usual hour for a walk?" His voice came to me from the semi-obscurity.

"No," I was forced to admit, "not usual; but we've been rather upset to-day, guests going away and that sort of thing. No doubt . . ."

I broke off. Someone had entered the house. We both started to our feet. I reached the door first.

"Diana," I called.

"Daddy," came a tremulous voice, and with a rush Pam was in my arms. The child was upset. Oblivious of everything save her unhappiness, I questioned her.

"He sent me back — oh, ever so far," she wailed. "He didn't want me. He's taken her away. He told her to come. Her face frightened me, Daddy. It wasn't our Diana at all."

What was it that at that moment made me turn, apprehensively, to the darkened room at my back? Certainly no sound had come from the dimly seen figure silhouetted against the sad light of the dying day.

CHAPTER L

When I returned from carrying my little daughter upstairs to her mother, I found Gerald already at the front door. Obviously fretting at the delay, his hat was already on his head. Before I had reached the bottom step, he was out of the front door.

"Come on," he urged. "You can explain as we go along."

For one so essentially boyish, he struck me as uncommonly masterful. Behind that quiet manner and subdued voice I was made aware of a driving force. His disposal of me, too, was of a piece with his grip of the situation. I was to accompany him. I was to explain. God knows it was what I desired, what I intended doing, but that he should have instantly announced both as his decision was characteristic.

Out of doors it proved much less dark than in the house. Black against the glimmering west, the trees alternately shivered and were still. Pools lay in the hollows of the road. The silence was profound. Not a soul seemed alive in this twilight world save me and the boy at my side.

"Which way?" he demanded, as we swung through the gate.

I pointed towards the head of the loch. That much I had managed to extract from Pam.

"Now," he said, "you've got to tell me."

I signified my willingness to tell him anything, upon which he questioned me about my little daughter.

"She's imaginative," I observed.

He looked at me quickly. "You mean — all she said?"

"No, not all she said."

"For God's sake, don't mince matters. Don't spare me. I want the truth. There was — there is someone?"

I returned a reluctant affirmative.

"Who is he?"

"He — he's a guest."

"A guest? That tells me nothing. What is he to Diana?"

That silenced me. What was he to Diana? Did I know? Did anyone know?

"I have a right to know."

I flashed a glance at the grave young face so close to my own. Was this coincidence, or telepathy? The statement undoubtedly came at that moment with peculiar significance. It was as though he had been listening to the working of my mind. It was the logical conclusion of my unspoken thought. Uttered quietly, it carried weight, for its truth was incontestable. If the dedication of a man's entire life to the happiness of a girl can give him any claim on her, then assuredly this man had the right to know. He expected me to tell him — he took it for granted. And there was something youthful and appealing in this wholly unself-conscious reliance upon my aid that made me doubly anxious to be of service.

It was by no means a light task I undertook when I essayed to explain. The pace he had set was nearer five miles an hour than four. The night was oppressive. Before we had gone far, I was as breathless and as wet as a man could well be. Then, too, I realised to my extreme embarrassment that I had undertaken something I could not carry out — at least, not to my own satisfaction. Somewhat I, indeed, managed to say, but

it resolved itself into a tentative and perilous skating over thin ice, a course of which I was inwardly ashamed. What he thought of it, I had not the means of judging, for he made no comment, for it was only later, when I began to exculpate Diana, that he cut me short.

"You needn't go on. I know all that."

He knew all that. He resented by mentioning it. His tone was unmistakable. It announced implicit and unalterable faith in Diana, a loyalty incapable of harbouring even the shadow of a doubt. So young, too! Extraordinary! A tower of strength. No wonder that when Diana told me about him she had seemed to lean against him, as though his very memory were a shelter and a support.

And yet, much must have puzzled him.

What did he know of Diana's other self? She believed that he knew nothing of it. But, did he? What did he imagine was the motive that had prompted Diana to break off her engagement? Had he agonised over that letter? It must have fallen upon him like a bolt from the blue. Had he painfully probed for meanings between the lines? He must have done so, for that he loved her, and that he suffered, were two unassailable facts which even his reticence could not conceal.

It is strange now to remember how impossible I found it to tell him things, to open his eyes, to make him see the situation as I undoubtedly saw it. It would have been impossible, for example, to make him understand the spell cast by the fairy-man. He had not met him. And, as personal magnetism lay at the root of that strange fascination, to have touched upon it would have been like addressing the young man in an unknown language. I felt strongly, too, that a character as fantastic, as elfish, and as abnormal as that of our amazing guest would make no sympathetic appeal

to the type of stalwart, bedrock normality driving along by my side. It was equally impossible to refer him to the theory of reincarnation as a clue to Diana's state of mind. When with a person who we know beforehand will disapprove of all we have to impart, the only course is silence. And "disapprove" is far too mild a term for the incredulity, the intolerance, and the indignation with which I knew such an explanation would be received. And not for anything in the world would I have hinted at my own personal apprehension. And yet, as I struggled to keep pace with him along the mysterious whiteness that was the road, never before had the lawlessness of the fairy-man appeared in a more sinister light; and, assuredly, only once before had the defencelessness of Diana racked me to anything like the same extent.

"When did they leave your house?" he demanded suddenly.

I told him.

"Two hours' start," I heard him mutter to himself, upon which he, if possible, increased his pace.

The recollection of that walk comes back to me at times like a remembered nightmare. It seems unreal, improbable, almost impossible — and yet at the time it was real enough. My own anxiety and distress were almost forgotten in the intense realisation of his anxiety and distress. No word that could possibly be translated as a concession to suffering escaped him. As in my last pathetic interview with Diana, I was awed by the heroic possibilities of silence. It demanded the tribute of a reserve as voiceless as its own. And yet his whole atmosphere proclaimed the presence of emotion. I felt it even in spite of his air of grim repression. His lips, tight-set, bore mute witness to it, as did his sombre eyes and the feverish energy of his every movement.

It was not till we had passed Craigruhe — a lonely house among trees — that I again addressed him.

"We're on the right road," I panted, "but we may have passed them."

He stopped short.

"We don't know where they've gone," I explained. "They left no word. They may be anywhere — up that glen — on that hill — anywhere."

He stared in the directions I indicated. I saw his teeth gnaw at his nether lip.

"It's getting dark," I went on in a low voice, "and it will be darker before the moon rises. If we only had some clue . . ." I stared down the road . . . "Is that someone? There!"

Not until the wayfarer had reached us did I recognise the roadmender.

Abruptly accosted by my companion, the old man's jaw dropped. The southern accent, the jerked sentences, the indescribable tense manner disconcerted the roadmender, and, according to custom, he took refuge in feigned stupidity.

"Look here, Mr. McClaren," I hastily intervened, "have you come far the night?"

"A bittock," he admitted.

"I warrant not as far as Monachyle-More."

With a display of yellow fangs, the roadmender exulted in my mistake.

"Get to the point. We're losing time," expostulated my companion.

"Whit are ye whisperin' aboot?" demanded the old man, turning suspicious eyes upon each of us in turn. Hurriedly I continued:

"I bet a penny you weren't as far as the ford."

"Weel, ye can pay it, for ye've lost."

"Is that so? It's a lonely road; I'll bet another penny you met no one."

The old man emitted a cackle. He peered up at me. "That's tuppence ye're owin'. I see fine ye're after her again, her that doesna look like a governess; but, hoots, ye'll no find her so easy this time. They're off to Inverlochlarig, no less. A mad-like thing at this time of night. Here!"—he raised his voice—"bide a wee! Guid sakes, where's yer hurry?"

And as Mr. McClaren, still expostulating, saw us vanish into the dusk, I can well imagine that he was as puzzled a man as ever mended a road.

CHAPTER LI

Leaving Monachyle-More upon our right, we passed through the gate that bars the road to motor-traffic, and breasted the hill that rises above Loch Doine.

The moment the wayfarer leaves Monachyle-More behind him, the character of the scenery changes with almost dramatic abruptness. The sylvan beauty that enchants in the shores of Loch Voil gives place at one stride to barren hills bereft of foliage. The gaze, unobstructed by vegetation, can sweep at will from the lonely water below to the lonely heights above; can look backwards to where Balquhidder nestles beneath its pine-clad slopes, and forwards to where Inverlochlarig lies between the naked knees of the hills. The scenery is wild, solitary, barren, but not without a stern and arresting beauty of its own.

It was as we tramped this unfrequented road that Gerald broke the silence that had lasted ever since we had left the roadmender a couple of miles behind. That he was bound to speak, I knew well. He had brooded overmuch. The rising tide of his feelings demanded a safety-valve. I welcomed anything that promised to relieve the strain.

"He must be a damned scoundrel!" he broke out.

I would have disclaimed the idea, but his indignation was not to be assuaged by contradiction.

"On your own showing, he's got some infernal power over her, and this is the gentlemanly use he puts it to."

Much upset, I protested that some women could not be compromised.

"Thank God for that! But no thanks to him — and, if you'll excuse my saying so, no thanks to you either."

That made me wince. He had me there. From his standpoint, he was right. I could advance nothing in my own defence — nothing, that is, that would exonerate me in his sight. And, moreover, something within me — my dignity, perhaps, and also, I think, a consciousness of having acted for the best — would not allow me to stand pleading in the dock before this intolerant young judge. And through the chaos of conflicting thoughts there struck a shaft of irony, the irony of fate, perhaps, that had decreed that I should be condemned unheard by the very youth whose cause I had so warmly espoused.

We strode along; the road leading us alternately up and down hill. A chill breath of air, precursor of the night, stole from the mountains and fanned our hot faces.

"Don't think I'm jealous," he blurted, half stopping, and turning defiant eyes upon me. My gesture was intended to disclaim the suggestion, but heedless of it he swept on:

"He's probably mad; that's the only excuse for him. Or, if he isn't, he's abnormal; and I hate that worse than poison. Jealous!" He laughed harshly. "By Jove, no! That would be the limit. Jealousy feeds on doubt — and I don't doubt, not for a moment. I know her as I know myself. This" — he pointed ahead to where the dim mountains loomed through the night — "will pass — bound to — when we meet. As for the — the blighter . . . !"

He shut his teeth on unspoken words. There was something ominous in the very sternness of his self-repression. And at that fear touched me. What would happen when these two men met? The fairy-man was utterly without restraint. This young fellow was

charged with anger. They would act upon each other like flint upon steel.

"Look here!" I cried. "Stop!"

He halted. I can see him now, standing on the lonely road, staring at me, a sombre figure in the waning light.

I seized his arm. I shook it. "Listen." I insisted. "You've got to leave him to me."

Our faces were close. I saw his jaw set.

"I'm damned if I will!" he said thickly. "She's not your girl. And what's more," he vociferated, jerking his arm from my grasp, "why should I leave him to you? What have you done that I should trust you? Asked him here — encouraged him — looked on, anyway. Oh, you must have known—must have seen . . ."

His censure was swift and harsh, for he was of the cruel age when the blood leaps and moderation goes to the wall. I did not blame him; no. I blamed myself. In my inmost heart I felt drawn to him even when he was most intolerant. In him, as he blazed at me, I seemed to see the vision of my own lost youth, ardent, high-spirited, impatient of control, capable of passion. I recognised, too, that had our rôles been reversed, I should have acted just as he was acting. One card, however, still remained for me to play, and, relying confidently on the chivalry of the young fellow, I pinned all my hope upon it.

"I don't ask it for my sake," said I, "nor for yours, but for hers."

He stared at me, visibly at a loss.

"Yes," I insisted, "whenever there is a woman in the case, and man resorts to violence, it's always the woman who suffers, directly or indirectly. For you and me she is inviolable, but the world . . . "

"Damn the world!" he interrupted hotly.

"Willingly, if it will do any good, but it won't."

He would have spoken, but he faltered, and nearly broke down. It was too painful. Even the satisfaction I derived from his promise that he would not be too precipitate was poisoned for me by the sight of his distress.

CHAPTER LII

The little farmsteading of Inverlochlarig was swathed in the veils of imminent night as Gerald and I paused uncertain whither to turn. The rude and huddled buildings seemed to be the last outpost of civilisation. Surrounding them on all sides lay the thick of the wild hills. Something of the mystery and isolation of these mountain fastnesses enveloped the lonely farm, imparting a strange air to its shadowy buildings, and a phantom-like appearance to the few figures that were to be seen in the yard.

There were, I knew, three possible routes starting from Inverlochlarig, any one of which might have been followed by the fairy-man, the first to Loch Lomond, the second to Loch Katrine, and the third to Crianlarich. All were wild, but the third was by far the wildest.

My hesitation was short-lived, for before Gerald and I had time to consult a man passed us. I hailed him. In answer to my query he halted, and I saw him turn towards the defile known as Inverlochlarig Glen, the third of the routes above mentioned.

"I misdoot they're away up yonder," he said, pointing, and his tone clearly indicated his opinion of eccentricity so unaccountable. "They went by us when we were dippin' the ewes. Oh, a matter of twa 'oors syne. No, there's no road, just rocks. Are ye seekin' them? Weel, I doubt if ye'll find them the nicht. It's an unco place yon to be wandered in when the mist comes doon — and it's comin', sure as death."

Whistling to his dog, he lurched heavily away.

Leaving the farm behind us, we began to ascend the glen. The term "glen" is to my mind a misnomer. The word is associated with foliage, but this gloomy gorge is softened by never a tree. The banks, on either side its burn, slope upwards in steep acclivities, rock-bestrewn and naked, to heights upon which the sun lingers long after the glen below is immersed in shadow. In broad day the stern and even savage character of its scenery is impressive, but at nightfall it might, without exaggeration, be described as sinister.

As we attacked the first slopes, I could see, to our right and far aloft, the great mass of Ben Ann awaiting the night. To our left, the cliffs showed dark and serrated, like the teeth of some monstrous saw. So unscalable did they appear, they seemed a rampart encircling a prison. Behind them, low down, the sky still bore traces of sunset. Above, in pale sea-green immensity, like the lantern of some far sea-voyager, hung a solitary star.

The knowledge that Diana was up there, possibly in danger, gave the desolate glen a poignant significance. I could guess at what Gerald was feeling by the anxiety and fear that oppressed my own thoughts. Every stone we passed associated itself with the young girl. The gloom, the desolation, and the mystery, all allied themselves with her fate. Here had she climbed — here, perhaps, had she paused. At this point, no doubt, had she gazed with beating heart, onwards and upwards, at the stern hills into whose fastnesses she was being lured.

Not for a moment was she absent from my mind. Question after unanswerable question besieged me, racked me, was banished, and returned. Why had the fairy-man conducted her here? When she passively allowed herself to be led away (as recounted by Pam), was she incapable of resistance? When her abductor

had her at his mercy, how would he act? With ever-increasing anxiety, hoping against hope, I brooded over his character as I knew it. One dominant trait, ominously significant, dwarfed all others — his utter disregard of all restrictions that came between him and the enjoyment of his immediate desires. Baffled and sore distressed, I was forced to admit that, unless a miracle intervened, the prospect was black indeed.

It was terribly rough going. Clambering over rocks, picking our way through bogs, wading ankle-deep in water-channels, we followed the course of the mountain burn, whose voice sounded now hoarse, now muffled, but always sad within our ears. The long-lived twilight of the North stood our friend; but at length even it deserted us. Not a sound save the mournful water-music disturbed the profound stillness.

Engrossed with our thoughts, and occupied with the difficulties of our climb, for long we exchanged no word. But though to my physical sight my companion had blurred into a phantom figure, so overpowering was his anxiety that it seemed to fill the night.

It was during a momentary halt, I remember, that the mist overtook us. I had seen it coming. No impact; just a sense of cold and damp, as though something unearthly had breathed on us in passing; and lo! the darkling world was blotted from our sight.

Advising Gerald to keep near me, I moved cautiously forward, but in another moment I discovered that we had already drifted apart. He must have heard my shouts, but I can account for his silence only by the supposition that so riveted was his every thought on Diana that he was insensible to all else. Be that as it may, no answering shout came to cheer me, and it was with a considerable accession of loneliness that I groped forward, guiding myself solely by the voice of the burn.

How long I stumbled in that drifting obscurity I cannot tell, but it seemed hours before a sudden flurry of air dispersed the mist and left me on the naked hillside, still benighted, but able once more to see the summits and the stars.

It was at this moment that, in front and at a considerable distance above me, I saw a light. No words can describe my feelings. Forgetful of everything except that it meant Diana, I tackled the precipitous slope almost at a run.

CHAPTER LIII

My pace soon slackened. The difficulties of the climb were greatly increased by the presence of the light. A heavy fall taught me circumspection, and the fact that all my sight was needed to avoid the obstacles that lay in my path. And yet, at the risk of being dazzled, I could not refrain from halting occasionally to stare at that pin-point of luminance. As I gazed at it, it waxed and waned. Occasionally it disappeared. I lost and recaptured it near a dozen times. For this the inequalities of the ground were no doubt responsible; though once, as I watched it, moving darknesses, that might be figures, passed across its brightness, momentarily snatching it from sight. I had not climbed far before I came to the conclusion that it was a bonfire built upon a ledge, for across the intervening darkness came the leap and flicker of the flames and the reflection from lighted rocks.

That mad scramble up the benighted cliff resembled more a fantastic dream than a sober reality, a dream that had the power to torture every faculty of mind and body. At the time — with all my energies concentrated on reaching the light in the quickest possible time — my immediate surroundings were nothing to me, nothing but obstacles to be overcome. Later, however, I discovered that they were indelibly stamped upon recollection — the cold, dripping surface of rocks, the treacherous give of quagmires, the hazy outline of heights, the blackness that lurked in hollows.

It seems almost incredible to me now, but in the rush of my excitement I had forgotten Gerald. An incident

entirely unforeseen brought him to memory. Pausing to regain breath, I was startled by the thud of a dislodged stone. By stooping, I made out the silhouette of a moving figure. To head it off was the work of a minute, for it was within a dozen yards and pursuing a course parallel to my own. Gerald — for it was he — would have outdistanced me had I not gripped him by the arm.

"Damnation!" he cried savagely. "Let me go!"

"I won't," I retorted; then, as he continued to struggle: "We've got them. He's there. He can't escape. All I ask — go slow — we'll soon see."

It took all my energies to restrain him, and even then I felt that at any moment he might break away. These last few hundred yards were an ordeal I shall never forget. My heart was pounding. Every faculty I possessed, both of body and mind, concentrated in my eyes, in a consuming anxiety to see. Intuitively I felt that a single glance would tell me all, would lift a weight from my heart, or fill it with remorse. A single glance did suffice. And as I received the message, I thanked God from the very bottom of my soul. All was well. I knew it. I knew it at once, and Gerald knew it too.

The picture they made — when all unseen we had come within a few dozen yards — is with me now, a treasured possession for all time. I can see Diana with her back half turned to us, partly in shadow, but with the firelight dancing on the pale gold of her hair.

I can see the fairy-man, too, in one of his characteristic, easy, graceful attitudes, just as I have seen him many a time leaning against our drawing-room mantelpiece. In his face is to be read interest, animation, and the undercurrent of joyous yet incomprehensible humour that seemed always to raise him to some serene altitude above the sorrows of humanity. He is talk-

ing — she is listening. Night surrounds them; but neither is aware of it. Some mysterious attraction, more potent than all material influences, links them together. One feels intuitively that, though deep as the eternal springs of life, though inevitable as destiny itself, this power is innocent, pure, almost impersonal. Such is the picture.

And then — I was startled by a shout from Gerald. At the breathless cry — her name — Diana started, stared one moment incredulous, and at the next was in her lover's arms. God knows they had every throb of my sympathy.

Turning hastily from them, I looked for the fairy-man. He had vanished. I sprang forward, reached the fire, peered beyond, but my dazzled eyes could distinguish nothing.

That moment of disappointment was responsible for the swing of the pendulum towards the fairy-man. I had misjudged him. I longed to make reparation. Leaving the fire, I plunged into the darkness. At first it was a mere groping in obscurity, but later, my eyes becoming more accustomed to the night, I began to distinguish somewhat of my surroundings. Below me, I could see a vague and pallid nebulosity which I surmised to be the sea of mist. Above, faintly silvered, roofed by the keen crystals of the stars, were mysterious masses which I knew to be cliffs.

I stumbled on, climbing ever higher. "He's there," I told myself. "Not far now. Perhaps waiting." My eagerness to see him increased. Several times I called aloud, but when I paused to listen for an answering voice, the silence remained unbroken.

I must by this time have reached a considerable height. Far below me, the fire still flickered. The sense of isolation was profound.

At length I halted. Pursuit I now recognised to be

hopeless; as easily overtake a stag. And, moreover, I could not tell in which direction he had gone. The gorge extended for miles. It was packed with darkness. I would call but once again. I could do no more.

With all the strength of my lungs, I shouted; then I held my breath. At first nothing. Then, mysterious voices tossing my cry to each other among the benighted cliffs. And again, as I waited, another sound, a sound so unexpected and so uncanny that it drove the blood from my heart — a laugh, faintly mocking, that seemed to fall from a great height.

CHAPTER LIV

"I CAN'T conceive why you take it so casually," said Mary, and flashed a reproachful glance at me across the breakfast-table.

"I don't take it casually," responded I, thoughtfully scraping out an egg. "I take it philosophically. Besides — what more could I have done?"

"Bloodhounds . . . "

I smiled. To me the idea of pursuing a fairy-man with bloodhounds savoured of crude melodrama, but all I said was: "We aren't film operators, my dear. Pam, pass the marmalade."

"Oh, I've no patience with you! Perhaps his poor body is lying away up there at this very moment, and you can sit — actually eating marmalade."

"Look here, Mary. We've thrashed this all out before. You know I went over every foot of the ground next day. I'm not indifferent. I'd give a great deal to know what's become of him. But I can't say I'm anxious. He's part of the hills. He could never come to grief among them. They wouldn't let him. Pam, pass my cup to Mummy."

But the discussion was not finished. Mary poured out tea with extreme inattention.

"Three lumps," I reminded her.

"What have the hills to do with it?" she demanded, as she passed my cup. "And how can they take care of him? And why did he leave us like that?"

"He left us like that because of Diana. She told me that, while they were up there beside the bonfire, he discovered that she really was in love with Gerald — her

counterpart, you know. The queer thing is that he never realised it before. Anyhow, it seems to have staggered him, for he went off suddenly, by himself — to think it over, I imagine. When he came back, he told her that her happiness in this life was in marrying her counterpart. And then he looked at her — you know that queer, laughing look he has — and said: "We part here and now, Diana. But we'll meet again. Counterpart is time, affinity is eternity. You and I will have some wonderful times together in eternity."

I could see Mary considering this from a common-sense point of view, and apparently finding very little common-sense in it.

"Why," she demanded at last — "why, if he's all right, doesn't he send for his portmanteau?"

I shrugged my shoulders. When one talks to a lady of eternity, and she replies with portmanteaux, a philosophical silence alone meets the case.

"Is he a fairy, now, Daddy?" questioned Pam, tugging at my sleeve.

"Yes. Perhaps. I hope so."

"Little or big?" demanded Pam with critical interest.

"Medium size," I answered at random.

"Like me?"

"Possibly."

"But I'm big."

I looked at my small daughter with exemplary patience, and asked her if she could manage to reach the toast.

"He carried me on his back, didn't he, Daddy?"

"He did, indeed, Pam," said I, munching. "Many a time."

"How he loved this place!" said Mary softly. "He just seemed to adopt us at once. His laugh — so gay always — and d'you remember how he danced

at that picnic? We'll never have such a guest again — never!"

"Never," I echoed. "He certainly supplied something . . . "

"Five sorts of sweets," murmured Pam.

"Apropos of vanished sweets," said I, rising, "why doesn't Gamine write?"

"We did hear."

"A little bread-and-butter letter to you, and a postcard to me. I don't call that writing."

"She promised me a doll with eyes that opened and shut," said Pam.

"She's probably making them open and shut herself," said I gloomily.

"And what about the Mountain?" I went on, turning to Mary. "You heard from him last week. Where is he? What! In London? That's unusual, isn't it? He generally waits till you go. He'll get lost."

Mary smiled serenely.

"I do think," said I, beginning to fill my pipe, "that these two behaved nobly. No one seeing them together could possibly have guessed . . . Oh, I see well enough what you're thinking — but you're wrong. I've studied Gamine for years. You never saw the Mountain after you went to bed. I did. He just exulted in his single-blessedness."

Mary's smile deepened.

"Look here . . . " I began vehemently, but at that moment the door opened.

"A telegram," said Jeanie confidentially, handing a pink envelope to my wife.

Mary read it aloud.

"How are all you dear people? Tell Pam sent doll at last. Any news of the fairy-man? Mountain and I married yesterday — GAMINE."

I prefer to draw a veil over the next few minutes. They need it. One blessing, for which I am grateful, is that Mary never says: "I told you so."

When the telegraph-boy had departed bearing our congratulations, and I was trying to forget my humiliation with the assistance of "The Scotsman," Pam took possession of my knee.

"Tell me about it all over again, Daddy."

"Well, Mummy and I went to Edinburgh for it the day before yesterday."

"I know that. Get on to the exciting part."

"Give me time, Pam. The organ played. We all stood up."

"Did she look sweet?"

"She looked beautiful."

"Jack, do help me."

I turned to behold Mary with a worried expression.

"I've got ten letters from governesses."

I sighed.

"Here's one — a clergyman's daughter, 'familiar,' as she puts it, 'with the harmonium.' Dotes on children, and paints on velvet. Says she's forty, but looks . . . "

"Thirty," I groaned. "Oh, I know the sort. Never again shall we get another Diana."

Mary laid a hand on my shoulder.

The language of pantomime has been sadly neglected in Albion, but, thank Heaven, we still have gestures too delicate and too personal to trust themselves to words. Such a gesture was bestowed upon me at that moment. Mary's hand said: "You've still got us."

Considerably moved, I patted the hand, and embraced my daughter.

"Oh!" gasped Pam, "that *was* a tight one, Daddy." Then, addressing her mother: "Daddy was just telling me about the wedding."

Mary's face shone. "Wasn't it perfect?" she cried. "And did you notice the bridesmaids' dresses?"

I shook my head.

Mary ruffled my hair. "He sees nothing!" she cried in mock despair.

"On the contrary," I corrected blandly, "he sees everything, everything worth seeing. Diana's face now — did you notice its expression? A new look, a wonderful look. It told me a great deal."

"Really!" mocked Mary, smiling.

"Yes, it told me . . ."

"Go on."

"It told me that Diana had found her soul."

THE END

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